

# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

July / August 2013 • cjr.org

## Lighten Up

Satire is going to save democracy

DANNAGAL G. YOUNG

### PLUS

Private Eye's Ian Hislop explains what's wrong with *The Daily Show*

Francesca Borri fights the power from inside war-ravaged Aleppo

John Summers was wrong for most magazines; that made him right for *The Baffler*



\$4.95

8958  
P001

#BX8E8E8 \*\*\*\*\*AUTO\*\*3-DIGIT 481  
#1880100002041318# M/J39  
NATIONAL ARCHIVE PUBLISHING  
EO BOX 998  
ANN ARBOR MI 48106-0998

# AOL welcomes Susan Lyne



And together, we would like to welcome  
**Cyndi Stivers** as Editor-in-Chief of AOL.com

SINCERE THANKS TO CJR



Seriously Invested in Journalism



# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

July/August 2013

"To assess the performance of journalism... to help stimulate continuing improvement in the profession, and to speak out for what is right, fair, and decent."  
—from the founding editorial, 1961



Clockwise from top left:  
From the gut in war-ravaged Aleppo **page 16**  
An outsider finds his place at *The Baffler* **page 38**  
Beltway freeze-out **page 53**

## Articles

- 26 COVER STORY: LIGHTEN UP**  
Satire can make American politics relevant again  
*By Dannagal G. Young*
- 29 FUNNY FOLLOWS**  
Rachel Sklar, Emma Carmichael, Chris Moody, and others share the tweets that crack them up
- 33 EYE'S UP**  
*Private Eye's* Ian Hislop explains why Americans don't like their peas touching their carrots
- 36 ON THE JOB**  
When bombs tore apart the Boston Marathon, *Globe* reporter Michael Rezendes shed his singlet and leapt into action  
*By Kira Goldenberg*
- 38 UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM**  
John Summers was wrong for most magazines; that made him perfect for *The Baffler*  
*By Justin Peters*
- 42 DISTANCE YEARNING**  
Done right, online courses could help democratize our newsrooms  
*By Lori Henson*
- 44 OPEN WIDE**  
How to navigate Obamacare  
*By Trudy Lieberman*

### 3 OPENING SHOT

Photojournalist Rob Hart chronicles his post-*Sun-Times* life

### 4 EDITORIAL

Once Congress fails to act, the foreign food-aid story will still merit coverage

### 6 LETTERS

### 10 CURRENTS

- Worst job in America
- China's new erection
- plus The Lower Case, Darts & Laurels, and more!

## Reports

### 16 SYRIA POSTCARD

The twisted reality of an Italian freelancer in Aleppo  
*By Francesca Borri*

### 19 PUBLIC MEDIA

In an all-access age, is government broadcasting irrelevant?  
*By Gary Thomas*

### 22 LEARNING CURVE

Why nonprofits can't save foreign coverage  
*By David Conrad*

### 24 BEHIND THE NEWS

Can Afghanistan's press survive without the West's support?  
*By Sabra Ayres*

## Ideas + Reviews

### 48 SECOND READ

David Armstrong's alt-media history, *A Trumpet to Arms*, helped former *Boston Phoenix* reporter Chris Faraone find his place in a long line of rabble-rousers

### 53 ESSAY

On the bad end of a freeze-out, *James Rosen* contemplates the deteriorating relationship between pols and reporters in DC

### 56 REVIEW

*The Wired City*  
*By Dan Kennedy*  
*Reviewed by Michael Meyer*

### 58 REVIEW

*Roger Ailes Off Camera*  
*By Zev Chafets*  
*Reviewed by Jim Sleeper*

### 61 REVIEW

*The World Is a Carpet*  
*By Anna Badkhen*  
*A review in comic form by Ted Rall*

### 63 BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

*By James Boylan*

### 64 EXIT INTERVIEW

Nicholas Lemann discusses his decade as dean of Columbia's Journalism School

# FREE TRAINING



**“I learned skills to start implementing immediately.”**

— Kimberly Adams, freelancer

## Free Workshops

**7.18, PHOENIX: Accountability in Indian Country**, with IRE Training Director Jaimi Dowdell. Before NAJA.

**9.28, MADISON, Wis.: Finding Your Best Investigative Business Story**, with Northwestern University Professor Alec Klein.

## Free Webinars

**10.8-10, SEC Filings Master Class**, with Footnoted.com's Michelle Leder.

**10.22-23, Data Journalism 101**, with Pulitzer winner Michael J. Berens.

**11.13, Sourcing with Social Media: Tips from a Corporate Sleuth**, with competitive-intelligence expert Sean Campbell.

SIGN UP AT

**BUSINESSJOURNALISM.ORG**



**BARLETT & STEELE AWARDS FOR INVESTIGATIVE BUSINESS JOURNALISM**

- \$8,000 in prizes
- Deadline: Aug. 1

Apply at [BusinessJournalism.org](http://BusinessJournalism.org)



Donald W. Reynolds  
**National Center for Business Journalism**

TWITTER: @BIZJOURNALISM • FACEBOOK: BIZJOURNALISM

# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

Published by the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism

DEAN Nicholas Lemann

CHAIRMAN Victor Navasky

VICE CHAIRMAN David Kellogg

ACTING EDITOR IN CHIEF Brent Cunningham

EXECUTIVE EDITOR Mike Hoyt

ASSOCIATE EDITOR/COPY MANAGER Tom O'Neill

ASSOCIATE EDITORS Kira Goldenberg, Sang Ngo

EDITOR AT LARGE Justin Peters

STAFF WRITERS Liz Cox Barrett, Curtis Brainard (Science), Greg Marx, Michael Meyer (Guide to Online News Startups)

THE AUDIT Dean Starkman (Kingsford Capital Fellow),

Ryan Chittum (Deputy Editor), Felix Salmon, Martha Hamilton (Audit Arbiter)

ASSISTANT EDITOR Sara Morrison

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS James Boylan, Julia M. Klein, Charles Lewis, Trudy Lieberman, Robert Love, Michael Massing, Judith Matloff, Douglas McCollam, Alissa Quart, Cristine Russell, Michael Shapiro, Scott Sherman, Clay Shirky

EDITORIAL INTERNS Joe Hernandez, Christopher Massie, Abraham Moussako

DESIGN Point Five, NY: Alissa Levin, Benjamin Levine, Nathan Eames

WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT Michael Murphy

ACTING PUBLISHER Dennis Giza EXECUTIVE PUBLISHER Stephanie Sandberg

BUSINESS MANAGER Marietta Bell

COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER Brendan Fitzgerald

ADVERTISING DIRECTOR Andrew Bell

CIRCULATION Collins Circulation Group: Paula Collins

BOARD OF OVERSEERS Neil Barsky (chairman), Stephen Adler, Emily Bell, Nathan S. Collier, Sheila Coronel, Howard W. French, Wade Greene, Joan Konner, Eric Lax, Kenneth Lerer, Steven Lipin, Craig Newmark, Michael Oreskes, Josh Reibel, Randall Rothenberg, Richard Snyder, Michael Schudson, Richard, Snyder, Laurel Touby

MAJOR FUNDERS for CJR and CJR.org include non-faculty members of the Board of Overseers and the Adams Cowan Foundation, The Atlantic Philanthropies, Maria Moors Cabot Fund, The Challenge Fund for Journalism, The Harnisch Foundation, Kingsford Capital Management, Peter Lowy, Gary Lutin, Martin & Brown Foundation, Omidyar Network, Open Society Foundations, The Saul and Janice Poliak Center for the Study of First Amendment Issues, Rockefeller Family & Associates, M & T Weiner Foundation, and The Schumann Foundation, as well as CJR's Leadership Council, including Franz Allina, John A. Byard III, Geoff Cowan, John E. Lyons, James H. Ottaway Jr., Albert Scardino, R. Ted Weschler, and Thomas E. Worrell III

CONTACT US Columbia Journalism Review

729 Seventh Avenue, Floor 3, New York, NY 10019

EDITORIAL 212-854-1881 E-MAIL [cjr@columbia.edu](mailto:cjr@columbia.edu)

ADVERTISING 646-932-2355 BUSINESS 212-854-2718

SUBSCRIBE [www.cjr.org/subscriptions](http://www.cjr.org/subscriptions) 888-425-7782, or mail \$27.95 for one year, \$41.95 for two years to: CJR, P.O. Box 422492, Palm Coast, FL 32142-8974

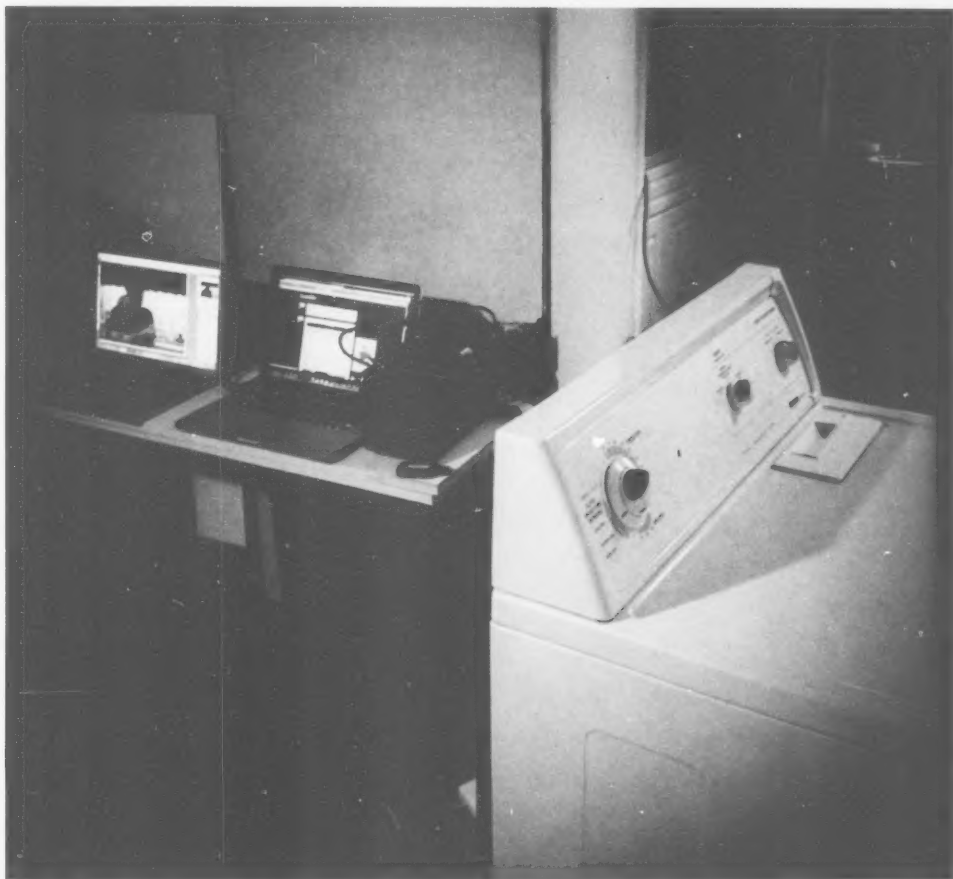
**cjr.org**

Columbia Journalism Review (USPS 0804-780) (ISSN 0010-194X) is published bimonthly. Vol. LII, No. 2, July/August 2013. Copyright © 2013 Columbia University. Subscription rates: one year \$27.95; two years \$41.95. Periodical postage paid at NY, NY, and at additional mailing office.

POSTMASTER: send form 3579 to Columbia Journalism Review, P.O. Box 422492, Palm Coast, FL 32142.



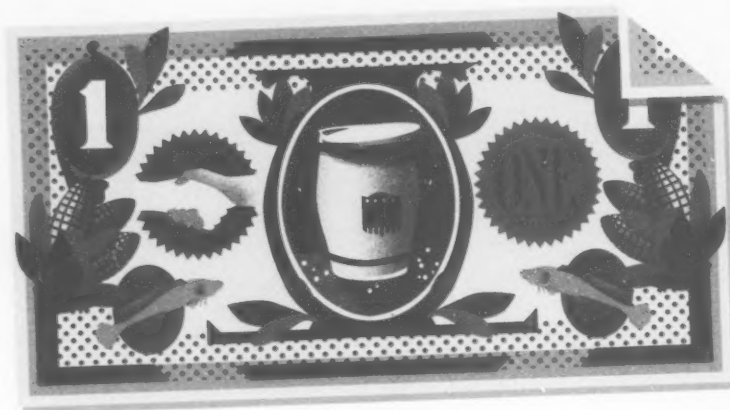
# Opening Shot



**O**n May 30, the entire photo staff of the *Chicago Sun-Times*—28 full-time photographers, including Pulitzer Prize-winner John H. White—were summoned to the Steamboat Room of the Chicago Holiday Inn, where they learned they were all being laid off. Going forward, the newspaper would rely on freelancers and reporters armed with smartphones to shoot photos and video. In a memo sent later that same day, managing editor Craig Newman informed the editorial staff that mandatory training sessions for iPhone photography basics would soon begin. Whatever *Sun-Times* investors save from these cuts, asking already multitasking reporters (who likely are more accustomed to taking smartphone pictures of their croissants than of dramatic crime scenes) to replace dedicated photo professionals is sure to be a loss for the paper's journalism. Cheap and fast is a business strategy that will hurt the quality of both reporting and photography. As Brian Powers, one of the laid-off photographers, put it, "A reporter asks, 'What happened?' While a photographer asks, 'What's happening?' It's really a different way of looking at things." **CJR**

ROB HART

**Second site** Photographer Rob Hart created a Tumblr ("Laid off from the *Sun-Times*"), on which he documents his "new life [of underemployment] with an iPhone, but with the eye of a photojournalist trained in storytelling." The photo above shows his new home office.



## Teach a man to fish

How the media can help fix our broken food-aid system

In their 2009 book *Enough: Why The World's Poorest Starve in an Age of Plenty*, Roger Thurow and Scott Kilman have an anecdote about Ethiopia during the 2003 famine that distills what's wrong with America's food-aid system. As trucks carrying tons of US grains and beans entered Nazareth, a city in central Ethiopia, they passed warehouses full of tons of Ethiopian grains and beans—the surplus from a bumper crop two

years earlier that had failed to sell when prices collapsed. Now, the market was undermined further by the arrival of international food aid. "American farmers have a market in Ethiopia, but we don't have a market in Ethiopia," said the manager of a grain-trading operation in Nazareth. He understood that Ethiopian-grown grain alone couldn't feed the hungry, but he also knew that American food aid had created a cycle of dependency that sapped the incentive of many of his countrymen to work to feed their families.

As far as the American public is concerned, food aid is a national success story. We feed the world! Where would those starving kids in Africa be without the largess of the American farmer?

The reality is far less sanguine. From the beginning, our food-aid system has been at least as much about helping American farmers, and the US economy, as it has been about helping hungry people in far-flung lands. The express purpose of the legislation that established the food-aid program in 1954 was "to lay the basis for a permanent expansion of our exports of

agricultural products with lasting benefits to ourselves and peoples of other lands." The law said that food aid had to be actual food, not cash, and that the food had to be purchased exclusively in the US and shipped only on US-flagged ships. This created a powerful alliance among the constituencies that stood to profit from this arrangement, the "Iron Triangle" of agribusiness, shippers, and charitable groups that distribute the food. (These NGOs are allowed to sell some of the food aid on local markets to help finance their development projects, an inefficient practice that the Government Accountability Office estimated cut funds available for development by \$219 million over a three-year period.)

In short, American food aid is a big business, and one that cloaks itself in moral imperative.

It is also, as Thurow and Kilman—and plenty of others—have shown, a terribly inefficient way to help hungry people. (In *Food Aid After Fifty Years: Recasting Its Role*, the scholar Christopher B. Barrett explains that 60 cents of every tax dollar spent on foreign food aid goes to administrative and shipping costs.) More important, these American-only restrictions stifle efforts in the countries receiving aid to become agriculturally self-sufficient. It is a classic example of a right-thinking government initiative that no longer works as it should, and is out of step with the values that undergird it.

President Obama's 2014 budget would require that up to 45 percent of the \$1.4 billion in food-aid funding be used to purchase food in the country or region in need. Based on recent news reports, the Iron Triangle is likely to kill this idea, just as it did in 2005 when President Bush attempted similar reform.

But the problem won't go away once Congress fails to act; neither should the media coverage of this issue. Breaking the grip of the Iron Triangle will require building support among the public for reform. Are we feeding the world, or ensuring that the world can't feed itself?

Food, broadly speaking, is a major story these days. From celebrity chefs to sustainability, food safety to school lunch, it's hard to open a newspaper or magazine, or turn on the television or radio without encountering something food-related. The food-aid problem isn't as sexy or compelling as what the critics are saying about the latest episode of *Chopped*, or a report on yet another E. coli outbreak, but surely the media can make room for a story about life and death and the squandering of millions of taxpayer dollars. **CJR**



THE ALICIA  
PATTERSON  
FOUNDATION  
**JOURNALISM  
FELLOWSHIPS**

---

**49<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL  
COMPETITION**

Applications are being accepted from print journalists and photojournalists with at least five years of professional experience.

One-year grants of \$40,000 and six-month grants of \$20,000 are awarded to pursue vital independent projects.

**DEADLINE:** Oct. 1, 2013

Applicants must work for English-language media.

**WRITE, CALL OR E-MAIL:**

The Alicia Patterson Foundation  
1090 Vermont Ave. NW  
Suite 1000

Washington, D.C. 20005

Phone: (202) 393-5995

Fax: (301) 951-8512

[info@aliciapatterson.org](mailto:info@aliciapatterson.org)

[www.aliciapatterson.org](http://www.aliciapatterson.org)

# IRE 2014 CONFERENCES



**CAR**

**Baltimore**

**February 27-March 2**



**IRE**

**San Francisco**

**June 26-29**

**IRE**

Investigative Reporters & Editors, Inc.

<http://ire.org/conferences/>

**The draw**

Re: "Streams of consciousness" by Ben Adler (CJR, May/June) Great read! As a millennial, I of course found it lengthy, and had to bookmark and come back a couple of times. But good content always wins. #LongForm-Journalism FTW :-)

Rob Graham  
Orlando, FL

**Junk food**

Re: Your editorial "Empty calories: To feed young minds, let's add some nutrition to social media" (CJR, May/June) Sadly, most of what is churned out on social-media sites is opinion over facts, and so many people swallow whole whatever they hear, no matter how far-fetched. Social media has such an enormous reach, but ensuring that what is spread on these sites is original and relevant to the important things in the world today (as opposed to Bieber's monkey) is a tall ask.

Steve Wright  
Bungay, Suffolk, UK

**Smoking gun**

Thank you for covering this story ("Sticking with the truth" by Curtis Brainard, CJR, May/June). Andrew Wakefield may have loaded the anti-vaccine gun with his fraudulent study, but credulous news media outlets pulled the trigger.

Ken Reibel  
Milwaukee, WI

Research is constantly amiss or badly reported. The stories with research that breaks from the crowd, even if flawed, are what the media wants. No one wants to report on another piece of research confirming what is already widely reported.

Balance within the BBC is also a difficulty, which meant that when programming for the Darwin project a couple of years ago, creationists were sought to



## 'Wakefield may have loaded the antivaccine gun, but credulous media outlets pulled the trigger.'

give "balance" when the weight of opinion makes them left-field loons. Misapplied balance is the biggest threat to rational reporting. I am a media trainer at [www.jdoubler.co.uk](http://www.jdoubler.co.uk) and a former BBC journalist. I've had to book guests for "balance" when I know there is only one side to a story because that's what producer guidelines dictate.

John Rockley  
Ruspidge, Gloucestershire, UK

With due respect to the *Tampa Bay Times*, which is an excellent newspaper, particularly for its coverage of Science, the paper "ignored established science" when it pushed for the return of fluoridation in Pinellas County. At the same time, it was editorializing for fluoridation when it published a meta-analysis from the Harvard School of Public Health confirming the accuracy of over 20 studies on endemic fluorosis in China that found that fluoride in drinking water damaged children's brains as

measured in lower IQ test scores. It seems newspapers and TV are not that good in covering stories in which experts disagree. Perhaps there should be a new prize for it.

Michael F. Dolan, PhD  
Department of Geosciences, UMASS  
Amherst, MA

**Above the fold**

Ryan Chittum's excellent article, "An Ink-Stained Stretch" (CJR, May/June) should be required reading for all of the credulous publishers and editors in America who swallowed the "digital first" hype of Internet consultants for years on end, even as their own newspapers went up in smoke. I especially liked the line regarding Aaron Kushner, new owner of the *Orange County Register*: "His thesis is simple, but highly contrarian: Newspapers are dying in large part from self-inflicted wounds..."

Amen, brothers and sisters.

A few of us have been out here crying in the wilderness against the digital hype and its lackluster blogs and delusions, at the helm of newspapers that remain strong and packed with journalism and features, precisely because we never drank the online Kool-Aid.

Robert Downes  
Managing editor and co-publisher  
Northern Express Weekly  
Traverse City, MI

The *New York Times* charges \$20 a month; the *Boston Globe* \$3.99 a week. I subscribe to both papers, digital only. Much as I would enjoy subscribing to the *Orange County Register*, I will not pay an inflated one-price-fits-all price at the same rate as a print subscription. They need to have some kind of tier system.

Ann Beebe  
Encino, CA

**In memoriam**

Sara Morrison's well-reported, very



**CIRCULATION: 75,000**



**CIRCULATION: 1.3 MILLION**

## Your world has changed. Have you?

Our **Digital Journalism Certificate Program** helps experienced writers, journalists, print and broadcast publishers merge their traditional skills with today's speedy content management. Master digital media outlets, engage readers, and promote news and information on current multimedia platforms.

UCIRVINE | EXTENSION

[extension.uci.edu/cjr](http://extension.uci.edu/cjr)



moving piece ("See you on the other side" *CJR*, May/June) about Jessica Lum, whose tragic death cut short a very promising life in journalism, leads to something important to remember. Although there is much (justified!) wringing of hands and gnashing of teeth these days about the multiplicity of delivery methods and the difficulty in obtaining paid work in journalism, we need to think about the many Jessica Lums in our world: young people who are inspired and driven to do meaningful reporting; young people who will pay whatever dues they have to—at least for a while—looking for a break; young people who need to be taught, mentored, supported. We should be honored by her example, and dedicated in her memory.

Larry Bensky  
Berkeley, CA

Jessica was the perfect example of a life well lived. It's not the length of life; it's the depth. Stunning and heartfelt story.

Lynne Tully  
Winthrop, MA

### Short-changed

Thanks, Beryl Lieff Benderly, for her article on the erroneous notion that the US suffers a shortage of STEM workers ("It doesn't add up," *CJR*, May/June). I have worked in IT for nearly 40 years, and although I'm nearing retirement, I keep fighting the guest-worker program (H1-B) with my senator and congressman. Our government is allowing corporations to fill challenging jobs with cheap labor. The guest-worker program was designed to bring over from other countries their "best and brightest"; instead, we are bringing over sub-par workers at a discount. There is no shortage of qualified college grads, and we should put them to work before resorting to hiring guest workers. Unfortunately, my argument keeps falling on deaf ears.

Greg Sherman

Comment posted on *CJR.org*.

Congratulations again to Beryl Benderly on another terrific piece that exposes the obvious truth, when most of the press is mesmerized by PR nonsense from the tech giants.

Steve Apfelroth  
New York, NY

I'm not in the STEM field, so I really appreciate Beryl Benderly's careful marshaling of the facts and avoidance of inflammatory remarks or exaggeration. Her article is a valuable contribution toward understanding an issue of major importance for STEM professionals and for our country.

George A. Goldberg  
Santa Monica, CA

The majority of our engineers beyond their mid-40s are now either unemployed or underemployed. Half of our nation's graduates with STEM degrees are unable to find work in STEM fields. Yet 30 to 50 percent of all new IT jobs go to foreigners on temporary US work visas.

These facts are well known in corporate boardrooms. But cheap labor has been a boon to their profits (at a six-decade high and massively profitable to foreign interests—the top 10 users are

off-source, outsourcing companies with six headquartered in India).

Tens of thousands have written their representatives; many have testified; and every unbiased study has proven that corporate claims of "skilled labor shortage" are a lie; and that there is indeed an abundance of Americans with every bit of smarts, skills, and education to fill any and all job openings.

Over-50, unemployed engineer  
Dallas, TX

### Corrections

In "The back page" by Jeffrey Robinson (*CJR*, May/June), we had it wrong: Murray Weiss didn't begin his career at the *International Herald Tribune*, but at the *New York Herald Tribune*. And in "Streams of consciousness" by Ben Adler (*CJR*, May/June), ABC News is a client of Storyful, not NBC News. **CJR**

### NOTES FROM OUR ONLINE READERS

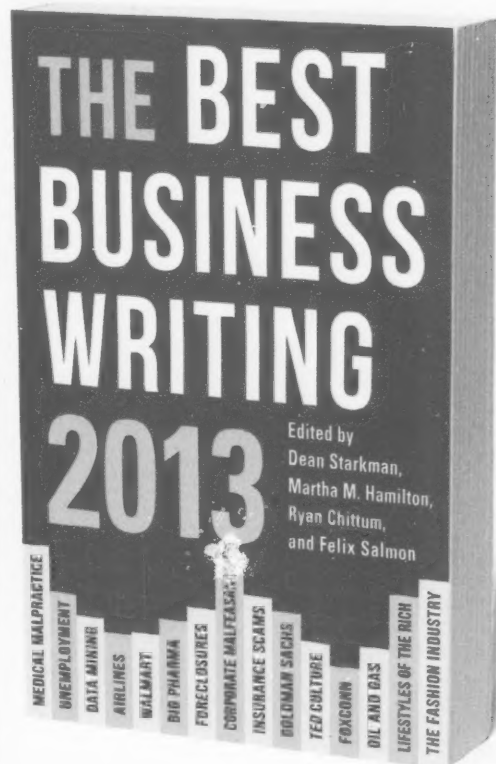
IN EARLY JUNE, *CJR* SCIENCE NEWS REPORTER CURTIS BRAINARD WROTE A piece that praised *Discover Magazine* blogger Keith Kloor for forging a beat out of noting when media publish work that misleadingly calls genetically modified food dangerous. Some GMOS, Brainard said, have been deemed safe by the likes of the World Health Organization. "The media have stoked irrational distrust of science in many fields over the years, from vaccines to climate change," Brainard wrote. "But today, such fear-mongering is most evident in the coverage of genetically modified foods, with many journalists turning people against them." He lauded Kloor for pieces about *The New York Times*, CNN, Reuters, and *The Guardian*. Readers responded:

I'm glad to have someone taking a harder look at this topic. But I wish there were more people doing it regularly. Plant-science facts are as important as climate-science facts as far as I'm concerned, but get a lot less ink (or electrons, I suppose). —Mary

Kloor is not interested in the science or journalism on the issue of GMOS. He consistently pollutes the Internet with false, misleading, and biased information from biased sources. In the past year, he hasn't published a single article representing the public-health community and public-health concerns of this technology. Instead, he consistently gives the microphone to industrial PR reps of agricultural interests and other junk scientists advocating for industrial GMOS. If Kloor is your idea of good science journalism, you are supportive of blatantly biased journalism, corruption of the media with marketing propaganda, and censorship. —dogctor

Your assessment of Kloor is right on. He plays a vital role in calling other journalists to task when they focus their coverage on a tiny fraction of fringe scientists, rather than the scientific mainstream and vast majority of scientific research which finds currently approved GMOS safe. We should all hope for better journalism that captures the state of scientific debates (including the weight of evidence on each side) rather than amplifying scary yet discredited findings. —Ramez Naam

## COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW BOOKS



*Now Available*

### **The Best Business Writing 2013**

*Edited by Dean Starkman,  
Martha M. Hamilton,  
Ryan Chittum, and Felix Salmon*

From corporate malfeasance and the decline of the middle-class to data mining and the culture of TED, *The Best Business Writing 2013* includes the most incisive and hard-hitting reporting and analysis of business's dynamic relationship with politics, culture, and the economy.

Contributors to this year's volume include:

Ken Auletta, David Barstow, Jake Bernstein, Steve Coll, Charles Duhigg, Paul Kiel, Mina Kimes, Mac McClelland, Bethany McLean, Evgeny Morozov, and Jeff Tietz

"Taken as a whole, the extensiveness and quality of coverage and writing make this an annual must-read for anyone interested in understanding the good, the bad, the ugly, and the future of today's business world."

— *Publishers Weekly*



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

[www.cup.columbia.edu](http://www.cup.columbia.edu) · [cupblog.org](http://cupblog.org)

# Currents



## Open Bar The Esquire Tavern

San Antonio, TX

**Year opened** Originally in 1933, the year Prohibition ended. It closed in 2006, and the current owner, Chris Hill, reopened it in 2011.

**Distinguishing features** The Esquire claims to have the longest bar, at over 100 feet, in Texas; a patio overlooks a quiet stretch of the city's River Walk; taxidermied wild animals adorn the bar and walls.

**Who drinks here** Downtown dwellers, tourists, local artists,

journalists, employees from the nearby courthouse and anyone who prefers their cocktails stiff

**Signature drink** Moscow Mule with house-made ginger beer served in a copper mug

**On the record** Esquire was nominated for a James Beard award for Outstanding Bar Program, and when celebrity chefs are in town, they try to quietly stop by—but word travels fast

—Jennifer McInnis is the wine and spirits writer at the San Antonio Express-News

Got a bar you love? Send recommendations for this feature to [openbar@cjr.org](mailto:openbar@cjr.org).

## Language Corner Orchestra Pits

Bob Kamman writes that he's seen "orchestrated" or "carefully orchestrated" misused a lot. He quoted a *New York Times* article about Dennis Rodman's visit to North Korea: "But you don't have to be Werner Heisenberg to wonder if the producers who *orchestrated* Mr. Rodman's 'basketball diplomacy mission,' and paid him to take part, were documenting life in North Korea as it is, or using the isolated nation as a backdrop for a new form of reality television."

"Is that *orchestration*?" Kamman asked. "Seems to me, it was a plan for a series of activities by one person, rather than a plan for simultaneous activities by a group."

An "orchestra," of course, is a lot of musicians playing different instruments, and often different notes, to produce harmonious results (usually). Most "orchestration," virtually by

definition, has to be "careful" to avoid unintended dissonance, so "carefully orchestrated" could be a bit redundant. But journalists most often use "carefully orchestrated" to mean manipulated toward a sought-for end: US arms sales to Mideast allies are "carefully orchestrated" to avoid offending other allies or enemies; a band's release of songs is "carefully orchestrated" to build excitement for an upcoming tour. The number of musicians or instruments is less important than the intent.

In careful usage, "orchestrated" would be reserved for those activities in which a lot of people work in concert to produce a specific plan. Kamman suggests that "choreographed" might be a better word when referring to intricate steps by individuals. But the *orchestration* idiom seems firmly rooted, much like an "earworm" (the song that gets in your head and stays there).

—Merrill Perlman



## Bad News

### Worst job in America?

Okay, so the newspaper business isn't exactly thriving; and the idea of casting a reporter as the hero in a movie seems quaint if not downright silly. But newspaper reporter is the Worst Job In America? Really? That's what CareerCast, "the Internet's premier career site," says. Worse than lumberjack (No. 2); and oil-rig worker (No. 5); and meter reader (No. 7). And CareerCast doesn't hesitate to kick us when we're down, noting that: "[N]ewspaper reporters have fared poorly in the Jobs Rated report for years due to the job's high stress and tight deadlines, low pay and requirement to work in all conditions to get the story." But when you consider what CareerCast says is this year's best job—actuary!—maybe life as a hack doesn't seem so bad?

## Hard Numbers

### 1.4 million

average viewers of *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* ages 18–49

### 1.1 million

average viewers of *The Colbert Report* ages 18–49

### 1 million

average viewers of *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno* ages 18–49

### 32

percent of *Daily Show* viewers who answered four current-events questions correctly

### 29

percent of *Colbert* viewers who answered those same questions correctly

### 21, 17, and 16

percentages of MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News viewers, respectively, who answered the questions correctly

### 4.2 million

views of subtitled *Daily Show* segment posted on Chinese social-media site Sina Weibo since April 4 2013

### 521

issues of *MAD Magazine* since its 1952 launch

Sources: The Futon Critic, Multichannel News, Pew Research Center, video.sina.com, The New Yorker, *MAD Magazine*

## Innovation Watch

# A bucket brigade

Last October, the day before *Newsweek* announced it would be shutting down its print edition, Peter Bilak launched a crowd-funding campaign for *Works That Work*, a new design magazine that is experimenting with a new, crowdsourced distribution strategy.

Based in The Hague, *Works That Work* has been “circulated” as far as San Francisco, Russia, and Brazil in the hands of readers, friends, and backers who pick up copies at half price from central hubs and sell them to friends, bookstores, and other outlets. The first issue of this semiannual publication came out at the beginning of this year, so it’s too early to tell whether spreading *Works That Work* this way will, um, work.

To get issues to São Paulo, for example, Bilak enlisted a friend, Lukas Timulak, who was working in Portugal, to carry 10 copies—all he could fit in his suitcase—to Lisbon. Timulak passed them on to Frederico Duarte, who carried them to São Paulo and gave them to Bebel Abreu, who runs a graphic-design and cultural-production studio there.

Abreu supplemented the issues with 27 others shipped straight from The Hague, and 10 more from another social distribution chain. She will try to sell the issues at full price, and in theory make a little money. “The more people get to know the magazine, that’s the most important,” says Abreu. “If we make some money out of it, we will be free to do it a second time.”

The process took months, making the unorthodox distribution strategy practically useless for magazines that come out more frequently. Issue number two is scheduled for July.

The idea is similar to Bilak’s approach to teaching: When you don’t have the right tool for a job, you build that tool. That’s what the *Works That Work* team did with the crowdfunding campaign, too. Kickstarter wasn’t available in the Netherlands, so they built their own version and raised €29,000, enough to launch and print the magazine, but not enough to distribute it.

Bilak says crowdsourcing is a small part of his overall



Peter Bilak

distribution strategy. The vast majority of sales come directly from the Web, and each copy is mailed separately. Around 20 percent of the issues are passed by hand, and another 10 percent are moved via traditional European distributors.

The scope of the magazine makes Bilak’s plan more feasible, too, as does its luxury market. An issue costs \$20, and they printed 3,100 copies of the first edition. But it’s still questionable whether (and how much) the crowdsourced distribution can scale. Magazine distributors exist because of economies of scale, says John Dorman, president of Newsways, a Los

Angeles-based distributor. “You’re not a mass-market title, so you don’t need huge numbers,” says Dorman. “And you probably don’t have a big advertising base to support, in which case it’s probably easier for you to experiment than some others.”

Distributors help get magazines to newsstands and bookstores and in front of new people, he adds. And that’s also Bilak’s goal. He says the idea behind *Works That Work* is to reach beyond the world of design, to show a lay audience the creativity that inspires design and how it exists in the world.

—Nathan Hurst is a San Francisco-based freelancer



## WTF?

# China rising

First came CCTV’s big boxer shorts, now the *People’s Daily’s* colossal phallus. As the Chinese state media look to conquer the global market, their insecurities are showing. China’s microblogging site Weibo has been gleefully atwitter about the nearly 500-foot-tall new headquarters of the Communist Party house organ, pictured near left. The architect says the design reflects the ancient Chinese philosophy of “round sky and square earth,” but we know what’s going on here. Nice try, China, but *The New York Times’s* is bigger.

**Manly media** The CCTV HQ was reportedly inspired by New York’s twin towers, but the Chinese saw underwear, or someone squatting over a toilet; the *People’s Daily* left no room for ambiguity.



## Darts & Laurels

### Bad bikes, coaches' cash, etc.



**DART** to *The Wall Street Journal* for its video segment ("Death by Bicycle") in which editorial-board member Dorothy Rabinowitz railed against New York City's "dreadful" new bike-share program, the "shocking" result of an "all-powerful" "bike lobby." Among her bizarre claims: the bikes would "begrime" neighborhoods, and "the

most important danger in the city is not the yellow cabs. It is the bicyclists." This was right after the segment's host noted that in the past four years in New York City, 597 pedestrians have been killed by motor vehicles. According to a 2011 Hunter College study, meanwhile, just three pedestrians had been killed statewide by collisions with cyclists in the four years prior to the study.

**LAUREL** to Deadspin, for its infographic showing that college coaches are the highest-paid public employees in most states. Twenty-seven football coaches, 13 basketball coaches, and one hockey coach. Will the Tea Partiers now add this to their anti-government rant?

**DART** to Skillshare for its "how to pitch a journalist" class led by Matthew Keys, which promised students they would learn how to "build a real relationship with a journalist in a world of emails, tweets, animated GIFs and Out Of Office messages." This could be a useful class, and versions that featured other journalists had gotten mostly great reviews. But it might not be worth that \$20 fee when the guy giving the expert advice was just fired from Reuters for social-media indiscretions, and is also under federal indictment. But forget those trifling concerns and listen to some of Keys's tips: Offer journalists free food and pitch between 1pm and 3pm on Thursdays (Tuesdays are okay, too).

**LAUREL** to the members of the *Chicago Sun-Times* photography staff, who deserved better than the unceremonious mass layoff they received on May 30. They were essentially replaced by reporters with iPhones. (For more on the situation, see this issue's Opening Shot on page 3.)

**DART** to Sinclair Broadcast Group, LIN Television, Nexstar Broadcasting, and the other major television broadcasters that used the windfall from last year's campaign-ad binge to go on a binge of their own: buying local stations in deals that are expected to reach a total value of between \$3.5 billion and more than \$6 billion over the next two years, according to a report released in May by Moody's Investor Service. Consolidation in the local TV news game is hardly new, but the driver of this latest wave—the estimated \$3 billion in political advertising that went to local broadcasters last year—is being described as the new normal, given the reality of super PACs and looser spending restrictions. Experts and broadcast executives alike say we are headed toward a local TV-news industry dominated by a handful of "super groups." Media consolidation has rarely brought the

journalistic benefits its proponents suggest, and there is little reason to believe it will in the case of local news. These are the same broadcasters, after all, who cried poverty when the FCC told them they had to post their data about those campaign-ad buys online, where the public could see the full story.



**LAUREL** to *The Wall Street Journal* for keeping reporter Kate O'Keefe on the Sheldon Adelson beat, even though the Vegas magnate is suing O'Keefe for libel. The suit, over a piece published last December in which Adelson was described as "a scrappy, foul-mouthed billionaire from working-class Dorchester,

Mass.," is frivolous. Given that the *Journal* and O'Keefe have had some good scoops on the serious federal corruption investigations into Adelson's Las Vegas Sands, the paper is signaling that it won't be bullied into pulling punches on its coverage.

**DART** to Politico for Dylan Byers's piece ("Turbulence at the Times") about *New York Times* executive editor Jill Abramson and her alleged unpopularity in the newsroom. Whatever truth the story may contain was overshadowed by the rote sexism that ran throughout. The first female executive editor in the paper's history was accused of being "impossible," "unreasonable," "stubborn," "condescending," "brusque," and "not approachable." Her male managing editor, by contrast, was "recalled fondly" for punching a hole in a wall. (He also was quoted as saying that the criticism of Abramson unfairly characterizes her as a stereotypical "bitchy woman.") The story came out less than two weeks after the *Times*, under Abramson's "unreasonable" leadership, won four Pulitzers. Byers didn't produce much to indicate she was doing anything wrong beyond not being the mother figure his anonymous sources want, or need.

**DART** to Gawker, which broke the story that the mayor of Toronto allegedly has a crack problem, but then sullied that good work by offering to pay a drug dealer \$200,000 for access to a video that purports to show the mayor smoking crack; then asking readers to help pay the drug dealer via a "Crackstarter" campaign; then, after collecting the money, informing everyone that the drug dealer was refusing to sell the video. Sure, Gawker told readers along the way it was having doubts that it would be able to get the video even if the money was raised; and yes, Gawker has promised to donate the money to a substance-abuse charity. Call us old-fashioned, but it's hard to see how that end justifies those means.

**LAUREL** to *The Guardian's* US edition, which landed a doozy of a first scoop with Glenn Greenwald's report that the National Security Agency has been collecting telephone records from millions of Verizon customers without cause or consent. (Which suggests a **DART** for the Obama administration for its perverse version of transparency and press freedom.)



## Social-Media Watch I ♥ the briny deep

According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the vast swaths of the world's oceans beyond the territorial jurisdiction of nations, known as the high seas, belong to everyone and are to be used for the common good. Ghislaine Maxwell, the daughter of the late press tycoon Robert Maxwell, decided the governments charged with collectively managing the high seas on our behalf aren't doing a great job. There are problems with pollution, overfishing, seabed mining, and so on.

So Maxwell, who has spent much of her life on or beneath the sea, conceived a Web-based "global community of ocean citizens" to raise awareness of and advocate for "the least explored, most ignored place on earth." She partnered with National Geographic, got the artist Shepard Fairey's shop to create a flag, and last September launched the nonprofit

**Waterworld** A view beneath the waves of Heron Island, in Australia's Great Barrier Reef, one of the virtual dives you can take at the TerraMar website.

TerraMar Project ([theterramarproject.org](http://theterramarproject.org)). The goal is to have a million citizens by year's end (there were 6,323 in mid-June). If that happens, Maxwell says, they could apply for official recognition by the UN. "Let's build it, and then see what the citizens want to do with it," she says.

For now, citizens of TerraMar can claim an ocean parcel, and become an ambassador by friending a marine species. Eventually, there will be a voting platform and citizens can vote on issues like whether to ban whaling or shark finning. The tallies will be sent to authorities that are making decisions about these issues. "The future of the Internet is curation," Maxwell says, "and that is what this site will do for people interested in the ocean."

## Title Search Human-capital consultant

**Shane Williams** is a human-capital and executive-search consultant at Egon Zehnder International. After earning his PhD in biochemistry at Cambridge, Williams completed his postdoctoral work at Harvard-MIT, then moved into consulting. Williams does not focus on media positions, but a growing number of search consultants who do are also certified as human-capital strategists. **Jay Woodruff** interviewed him in May.

**Give us your tweetable definition of a human-capital strategist.** A trusted adviser enabling business leaders to solve their most difficult challenges with talent.

**How much of your time is spent undoing the damage inflicted by traditional, nonhuman, capital-strategist-type recruiters?** Executive search does have some image problems, but I'm sure we all aspire to identify high-quality candidates and provide insight on the evolving business landscape. It's a hard job.

**How has recruiting changed in the digital age?** The level of



available data on candidates is significantly greater than even a few years ago. This can be invaluable if candidates want to promote their personal brand. However, future employers are only a few clicks away from your posts, pictures, tags, etc.

**How'd you get into this**

**racket?** I'm a scientist by training, but I discovered I had a passion for people in strategy consulting, and later focused on leadership assessment when I moved to industry. I was subsequently a candidate for a biotech search and became intrigued. Before I knew it, I was on the other side of the table.

**What tips do you have for people hoping to move from traditional occupations to digital-age occupations?** Find something you love doing, not what you think will be the wave of the future. Regularly do a quick vanity search or setup a Google Alert. Hopefully, what happened in Vegas, remained in Vegas.

## Strange But True

### Before you go...

**Carrie Ching** is developing a storytelling series about journalists called *Off The Record* ([offtherecordstories.com](http://offtherecordstories.com)). To introduce the series to CJR readers, we asked her to write her own OTR story. Learn more about her work at [carrieching.com](http://carrieching.com) and follow her on Twitter @carrieching.



In 2004, *Frontline/World* sent me to Thailand to interview expat Vietnam vets about the upcoming US presidential election. I had an appointment with a vet I'd contacted by email in Pattaya, a coastal city that is a bumpy three-hour bus ride from Bangkok; it also is a notorious sex-tourism hotspot, a known hangout for foreign pedophiles. I was traveling with a girlfriend and a lot of expensive video gear; neither of us had been to Thailand before.

As the bus exited the highway, we hit standstill traffic. A truck full of teenagers pulled up and began pelting the bus windows with white paste and spraying it with water. I anxiously asked another passenger what was going on. All I got was a knowing smile and the word "Songkran."

Songkran, the Thai New Year, is a multi-day festival in April. The white paste is supposed to be a gentle blessing; the water symbolizes renewal. But add gallons of booze, a pharmacy of drugs, hundreds of Thai prostitutes, some rowdy American sailors, and a gang of dirty old men, and you have the monstrous concoction that is Songkran, Pattaya-style.

We reached our stop, a random gas station, two hours late. A drunken mob filled the sidewalks and spilled into the streets. I called the vet. We were a 10-minute walk from his place. Techno music pounded from speakers on every corner, where Thais danced frantically. Scattered among the locals were older American and European men, and young US soldiers with crew cuts. I had the uneasy sense that we were the only foreign women for miles. Being half-Chinese, I could have passed, but my friend is blonde with blue eyes. Thai women in Lycra skirts sprayed us with hoses; men with wild eyes smeared that white paste on our faces and hair. I clutched my camera bag and we ran.

It was getting dark when we found the vet's apartment. He was standing calmly on the sidewalk in a clean, flowered shirt. We looked like stray cats that had gone through the spin cycle with a bag of flour. In the lobby of his building, older white men accompanied by very young Thai girls and boys streamed between the elevators and the front door. Some were headed out for a night on the strip, others were headed in for... I tried not to think about it.

The vet led us to a small, fluorescent-lit studio where two young Asian women perched on the sofa. I set up my camera and conducted the interview in as professional a manner as I could. Here I was, on the rowdiest night in the rauchiest town in Thailand, and we were talking about... John Kerry's military record?

After we finished, the vet offered to take us out. My friend and I looked at each other. Spend the night in Pattaya? No thanks. We hired a taxi to drive us the nearly 100 miles back to Bangkok.

## The Lower Case

### Dead Bombing Suspect Kicked Out Of Prayer Service After Outburst

*Talking Points Memo*, 4/22/13

### • Jaguars' Jones-Drew charged with battery

*ESPN*, 5/28/13

### Chinese flock to northern Finland for ruff mating season

*Yle Uutiset*, 5/29/13

### Oxnard council axes break

*Ventura County (CA) Star*, 4/30/13

### Dad says diplomat had passion for foreign affairs

*Des Moines Register*, 4/8/13

### Feds Eye Bombing Suspect's Wife

*AOL News*, 4/22/13

### Students sell lemonade after death of classmate

*Fort Collins Coloradoan*, 5/15/13

CJR offers a one-year subscription or gift subscription for an item published in *The Lower Case*. Please send original clippings to CJR, 729 Seventh Avenue, 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10019, or links for Web items to [tso2@columbia.edu](mailto:tso2@columbia.edu). Please include address, phone, and email.

## Woman's work

*The twisted reality of an Italian freelancer in Syria*

HE FINALLY WROTE TO ME. AFTER MORE THAN A YEAR OF FREELANCING FOR him, during which I contracted typhoid fever and was shot in the knee, my editor watched the news, thought I was among the Italian journalists who'd been kidnapped, and sent me an email that said: "Should you get a connection, could you tweet your detention?"

That same day, I returned in the evening to a rebel base where I was staying in the middle of the hell that is Aleppo, and amid the dust and the hunger and the fear, I hoped to find a friend, a kind word, a hug. Instead, I found only another email from Clara, who's spending her holidays at my home in Italy. She's already sent me eight "Urgent!" messages. Today she's looking for my spa badge, so she can enter for free. The rest of the messages in my inbox were like this one: "Brilliant piece today; brilliant like your book on Iraq." Unfortunately, my book wasn't on Iraq, but on Kosovo.

People have this romantic image of the freelancer as a journalist who's exchanged the certainty of a regular salary for the freedom to cover the stories she is most fascinated by. But we aren't free at all; it's just the opposite. The truth is that the only job opportunity I have today is staying in Syria, where nobody else wants to stay. And it's not even Aleppo, to be precise; it's the frontline. Because the editors back in Italy only ask us for the blood, the bang-bang. I write about the Islamists and their network of social services, the roots of their power—a piece that is definitely more complex to build than a frontline piece. I strive to explain, not just to move, to touch, and I am answered with: "What's this? Six thousand words and nobody died?"

Actually, I should have realized it that time my editor asked me for a piece on Gaza, because Gaza, as usual, was being bombed. I got this email: "You know Gaza by heart," he wrote. "Who cares if you are in Aleppo?" Exactly. The truth is, I ended up in Syria because I saw the photographs in *Time* by Alessio Romenzi, who was smuggled into Homs through the water pipes when nobody was yet aware of the existence of Homs. I saw his shots while I was listening to Radiohead—those eyes, staring at me; the eyes of people being killed by Assad's army, one by one, and nobody had even heard of a place called Homs. A vise clamped around my conscience, and I had to go to Syria immediately.

But whether you're writing from Aleppo or Gaza or Rome, the editors see no difference. You are paid the same: \$70 per piece. Even in places like Syria, where prices triple because of rampant speculation. So, for example, sleeping in this rebel base, under mortar fire, on a mattress on the ground, with yellow water that gave me

typhoid, costs \$50 per night; a car costs \$250 per day. So you end up maximizing, rather than minimizing, the risks. Not only can you not afford insurance—it's almost \$1,000 a month—but you cannot afford a fixer or a translator. You find yourself alone in the unknown. The editors are well aware that \$70 a piece pushes you to save on everything. They know, too, that if you happen to be seriously wounded, there is a temptation to hope not to survive, because you cannot afford to be wounded. But they buy your article anyway, even if they would never buy the Nike soccer ball handmade by a Pakistani child.

With new communication technologies there is this temptation to believe that speed is information. But it is based on a self-destructive logic: The content is now standardized, and your newspaper, your magazine, no longer has any distinctiveness, and so there is no reason to pay for the reporter. I mean, for the news, I have the Internet—and for free. The crisis today is of the media, not of the readership. Readers are still there, and contrary to what many editors believe, they are bright readers who ask for simplicity without simplification. They want to understand, not simply to know. Every time I publish an eyewitness account from the war, I get a dozen emails from people who say, "Okay, great piece, great tableaux, but I want to *understand* what's going





**A dark, rancid corner** Borri says journalists have failed to explain Syria's civil war because editors only want 'blood.'

on in Syria." And it would so please me to reply that I cannot submit an analysis piece, because the editors would simply spike it and tell me, "Who do you think you are, kid?"—even though I have three degrees, have written two books, and spent 10 years in various wars, first as a human-rights officer and now as a journalist. My youth, for what it's worth, vanished when bits of brain splattered on me in Bosnia, when I was 23.

Freelancers are second-class journalists—even if there are only freelancers here, in Syria, because this is a dirty war, a war of the last century; it's trench warfare between rebels and loyalists who are so close that they scream at each other while they shoot each other. The first time on the frontline, you can't believe it, with these bayonets you have seen only in history books. Today's wars are drone wars, but here they fight meter by meter, street by street, and it's fucking scary. Yet the editors back in Italy treat you like a kid;

you get a front-page photo, and they say you were just lucky, in the right place at the right time. You get an exclusive story, like the one I wrote last September on Aleppo's old city, a UNESCO World Heritage site, burning as the rebels and Syrian army battled for control. I was the first foreign reporter to enter, and the editors say: "How can I justify that my staff writer wasn't able to enter and you were?" I got this email from an editor about that story: "I'll buy it, but I will publish it under my staff writer's name."

And then, of course, I am a woman. One recent evening there was shelling everywhere, and I was sitting in a corner, wearing the only expression you could have when death might come at any second, and another reporter comes over, looks me up and down, and says: "This isn't a place for women." What can you say to such a guy? Idiot, this isn't a place for *anyone*. If I'm scared, it's because I'm sane. Because Aleppo is all gunpowder and testosterone, and

everyone is traumatized: Henri, who speaks only of war; Ryan, tanked up on amphetamines. And yet, at every torn-apart child we see, they come only to me, a "fragile" female, and want to know how I am. And I am tempted to reply: I am as you are. And those evenings when I wear a hurt expression, actually, are the evenings I protect myself, chasing out all emotion and feeling; they are the evenings I save myself.

Because Syria is no longer Syria. It is a nuthouse. There is the Italian guy who was unemployed and joined al-Qaeda, and whose mom is hunting for him around Aleppo to give him a good beating; there is the Japanese tourist who is on the frontlines, because he says he needs two weeks of "thrills"; the Swedish law-school graduate who came to collect evidence of war crimes; the American musicians with bin Laden-style beards who insist this helps them blend in, even though they are blonde and six-feet, five-inches tall. (They



brought malaria drugs, even if there's no malaria here, and want to deliver them while playing violin.) There are the various officers of the various UN agencies who, when you tell them you know of a child with leishmaniasis (a disease spread by the bite of a sand fly) and could they help his parents get him to Turkey for treatment, say they can't because it is but a single child, and they only deal with "childhood" as a whole.

But we're war reporters, after all, aren't we? A band of brothers (and sisters). We risk our lives to give voice to the voiceless. We have seen things most people will never see. We are a wealth of stories at the dinner table, the cool guests who everyone wants to invite. But the dirty secret is that instead of being united, we are our own worst enemies; and the reason for the \$70 per piece isn't that there isn't any money, because there is always money for a piece on Berlusconi's girlfriends. The true reason is that you ask for \$100 and somebody else is ready to do it for \$70. It's the fiercest competition. Like Beatriz, who today pointed me in the wrong direction so she would be the only one to cover the demonstration, and I found myself amid the snipers as a result of her deception. Just to cover a demonstration, like hundreds of others.

## Today, a Syrian man stopped me; he told me: 'Shame on you.'

Yet we pretend to be here so that nobody will be able to say, "But I didn't know what was happening in Syria." When really we are here just to get an award, to gain visibility. We are here thwarting one another as if there were a Pulitzer within our grasp, when there's absolutely nothing. We are squeezed between a regime that grants you a visa only if you are against the rebels, and rebels who, if you are with them, allow you to see only what they want you to see. The truth is, we are failures. Two years on, our readers barely remember where Damascus is, and the world instinctively describes what's happening in Syria as "that mayhem," because nobody understands anything about Syria—only blood, blood, blood. And that's why the Syrians cannot stand us now. Because we show the world photos like that 7-year-old child with a cigarette and a Kalashnikov. It's clear that it's a contrived photo, but it appeared

in newspapers and websites around the world in March, and everyone was screaming: "These Syrians, these Arabs, what barbarians!" When I first got here, the Syrians stopped me and said, "Thank you for showing the world the regime's crimes." Today, a man stopped me; he told me, "Shame on you."

Had I really understood something of war, I wouldn't have gotten sidetracked trying to write about rebels and loyalists, Sunnis and Shia. Because really the only story to tell in war is how to live without fear. It all could be over in an instant. If I knew that, then I wouldn't have been so afraid to love, to dare, in my life; instead of being here, now, hugging myself in this dark, rancid corner, desperately regretting all I didn't do, all I didn't say. You who tomorrow are still alive, what are you waiting for? Why don't you love enough? You who have everything, why you are so afraid? **CJR**

FRANCESCA BORRI published two books, one on Kosovo and another on Israel/Palestine, while working as a human-rights officer. She turned to journalism when she realized that power players were more upset by what she wrote than what she did as a jurist. She is currently covering the war in Syria. (With the exception of Alessio Romanzi, the names in this article have been changed for reasons of privacy.)



**Maximum risk** The author dodges sniper fire in Aleppo's Salaheddin neighborhood.

## Mission impossible

*Is government broadcasting irrelevant?*

WHAT US GOVERNMENT AGENCY WAS RECENTLY LABELED “DYSFUNCTIONAL” BY the State Department’s Inspector General, and year after year is rated in employee surveys as the worst—or near worst—place to work in government? If you guessed the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), which oversees the Voice of America (VOA), Radio Marti, Radio Free Europe, and the rest of the federal government’s media outlets, you are correct. In 2009, *Washington Post* columnist Joe Davidson wrote that the BBG has come to mean “bottom of the barrel in government.”

The core problem afflicting the BBG and its various entities is institutional schizophrenia. It is simultaneously a news organization trying to be a government agency, and a government agency trying to be a news outlet. Since 1942, the US government has been broadcasting—and now texting, tweeting, and Facebooking—to the world. VOA was the first, and remains the best known of the government broadcasters. In VOA’s first broadcast (in German), the announcer said, “The news may be good or bad. We shall tell you the truth.”

VOA’s journalists have had a clear mandate under the charter, signed into law by President Gerald Ford in 1976, to present unbiased news to the world, especially to countries denied uncensored news. But the charter also says VOA will “present the policies of the United States clearly and effectively, and will also present responsible discussions and opinion on these policies.” The schizophrenia, then, was built into the equation from the start.

Today, though, the problem of conflicting missions is exacerbated by the fact that the Board of Governors—and in particular the VOA, where I worked as a correspondent and news analyst for 27 years—has become mired in bloated bureaucracy, duplication of effort, internecine warfare between broadcast entities, and subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) efforts to politicize the news. The workforce is demoralized, and the credibility of the news has been undercut. It raises the question of whether, given that people around the world now have unprecedented access to news and information, we still need the VOA and its sister outlets to attempt this awkward dance between journalism and public diplomacy.

POLICYMAKERS HAVE LONG VIEWED US INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING AS PART of the public-diplomacy effort. The USC Center on Public Diplomacy’s website notes that the term was coined to get away from the pejorative word “propaganda.” The center says that “in the past few decades, public diplomacy has been widely seen as the transparent means by which a sovereign country communicates with publics in other countries aimed at informing and influencing audiences

overseas for the purpose of *promoting the national interest and advancing its foreign policy goals* [italics added].”

In other words, “public diplomacy” is simply public affairs—that is, spin, propaganda, messaging, whatever you wish to call it—re-labeled and repackaged for foreign consumption. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said as much before departing from the Obama cabinet. “We have abdicated the broadcasting arena,” she said at a congressional hearing. “[W]e have private stations, CNN, Fox, NBC, all of that. They’re out there, they convey information. But we’re not doing what we did during the Cold War. Our Broadcasting Board of Governors is practically defunct in terms of its capacity to be able to tell a message around the world.”

VOA has often been called a propaganda agency, but it’s not. It has fulfilled its public-diplomacy role by broadcasting editorials, which are labeled as official government viewpoints. In this way, the separation between news and propaganda is maintained, at least in theory. VOA correspondents travel on normal passports (although non-journalist employees use “official” or “diplomatic” ones) and get journalist visas to travel to countries with visa requirements. However, when VOA/BBG executives and administrators travel overseas, they use official or diplomatic passports and get logistic and other assistance from the local US embassy. It’s no wonder that governments are confused about the role of American international broadcasting.

VOA earned credibility around the world on the basis of its honest journalism, even when its stories conflicted with US policy. “Some might argue that as a government-funded network, the VOA should always be expected to portray US policies as righteous and successful,” wrote former VOA Director Sanford Ungar in *Foreign Affairs* in 2005. “But experience demonstrates that the VOA is most appreciated and effective when it functions as a model US-style news organization that presents a balanced view of domestic and international events, setting an example for how independent journalism can strengthen democracy.”

VOA was part of the US Information

Agency (USIA), which was an arm of the State Department. But VOA, in particular its Central News Division, which provides content to 45 language services, has fought to protect the agency's journalistic independence in the face of attempts by government officials to influence news coverage. I once had a deputy chief of mission in Pakistan threaten to have me thrown out of the country if I went into then-communist Afghanistan without embassy permission. In his *Foreign Affairs* article, Ungar cited instances of attempts by one of his predecessors, David Jackson, to skew news coverage to be favorable to the Bush administration, especially during the Iraq War. (In a rebuttal, Jackson—now executive editor of *The Washington Times*—denied Ungar's assertions, saying his piece was “filled with errors and unsupportable accusations.”)

In 1994, Congress reorganized the government's international broadcasting function by creating the Broadcasting Board of Governors within USIA to oversee all broadcast entities. The USIA as a whole was abolished five years later, with all non-broadcasting functions (embassy public affairs, libraries, etc.) transferred to State Department control, but the BBG was kept as a separate organization. The board was to act as a “firewall” against political or bureaucratic influence over the integrity of the news. But instead of being a solution, the BBG became the problem. The part-time, nine-member, politically appointed board—half Democrats, half Republicans, with the secretary of state as an ex-officio member—started micromanaging operations through the creation of an administrative bureaucracy dubbed the International Broadcasting Bureau. The bureau runs the day-to-day business of the broadcasters, but over time has expanded into peripheral projects like audience research and strategic planning—in essence whatever the Board of Governors wants it to do. Senator Richard Lugar wrote in a 2010 piece in the *Foreign Service Journal* that “after 15 years...it has become clear that, rather than serving as a political ‘firewall,’ the BBG has often become a political ‘football’ as board nominations have become enmeshed in partisan politics.”

One result of this micromanaging is that a commercial mode has taken root at Voice of America, where the equivalent of chasing ratings has become paramount and the news has been trivialized in much the same way it has at networks and stations across the country. As a 2007 report by McCormick-Tribune Foundation put it, “Once the centerpiece in America's arsenal for fighting the war of ideas through their trenchant and focused programming, American international broadcasting in recent years has lurched in the direction of becoming just another competitor in the crowded field of commercial broadcasters purveying a menu of entertainment, popular culture and news.”

The BBG brought in outside people, many of them former CNN managers, to sharpen this commercial-style focus. Hard news, the meat and potatoes of VOA since its inception, has been greatly de-emphasized. Pressure has increased for softer stories, usually of two minutes or less, which are then translated for use by the language services. (There is virtually no English-language television, and English-language radio programming has been drastically cut back, even though it's the strongest medium to reach remote audiences that lack computers or TVs.)

The VOA's journalistic standards have suffered in this push into a more commercial-TV mode. For instance, there was always a strict two-source rule: The essential elements of all stories had to be verified by two sources (typically two wire services) before a story would be issued. The exception was if a VOA correspondent witnessed an event. But some language services complained that they were not getting stories from Central News fast enough. VOA Director David Ensor, and a subsequent internal review of the news operation, recommended doing away with that requirement and allowing stories to be pinned on one attributed source, usually a wire service.

The Central News Division has resisted efforts to dumb down the news operation, and that has led to clashes with upper management. VOA management has tried to break up the division, which is staffed by professional

journalists, and scatter its members to the language services. Traditionally, most of the news broadcast by the VOA has been produced by the journalists in Central News and sent to the various language services, where it is translated for their respective audiences. For some time now, the language services have been eager to broaden their mandate, and the agency's leadership has come to believe that much of the work done by Central News can be done by language services. “We have to struggle every day just to cover the important news now,” said one VOA senior news editor, who asked not to be identified.

The politically incorrect secret at VOA is the wildly inconsistent journalistic acumen of the language services. Some possess a wealth of journalistic expertise; others are woefully bereft. The disparity is explained by the simple fact that it is difficult to find people who are fluent in a given language, and also have experience in the kind of rigorous journalism VOA has traditionally required. Many are academics, here or in their country of origin, but have no journalistic background. The services often turn to émigré communities for recruitment, and a lot of the staffers come from countries where news organizations are expected to be politically partisan or pro-government. Some language services—in particular the Farsi-language service broadcasting to Iran—have been criticized on Capitol Hill and elsewhere for alleged bias in their broadcasts, arising in large part from deep partisan divides over developments or movements in the countries to which they broadcast.

But VOA officials continue to deny there is any disparity in journalistic expertise. At a recent program review of the Central News Division, one of the reviewing officers said: “There are still two classes of reporters in this place, the English-language reporters and then everybody else who is a reporter or stringer. And some of those reporters and stringers in the field, in vernacular language, are as good or better than the English-language people, and we think Central News cheats itself by not allowing, not taking advantage, frankly, of all of the VOA news sources that are covering stories.”

Thus, the journalistic coherence that Central News brings to VOA has been rendered impotent. In effect, VOA now has 45 different news operations, each with the potential to put a different spin on the same story. If there is a clash on the India-Pakistan border, let's say, the Pakistani-oriented Urdu Service may issue a very different view of events than the Hindi-language service aimed at India.

The Board of Governors is trying to sell the Obama administration and Congress on a scheme to merge all the broadcast entities into something called the Global News Network, under the authority of an international broadcasting czar. The BBG's Strategic Plan outlines a grandiose vision to "become the world's leading international news agency by 2016." There are indications this plan may be shelved for now, or ramped down, because of the fragile budgetary climate. The FY 2013 budget for BBG is \$756 million—chump change in the governmental scheme of things—and the kind of effort envisioned by the BBG would require huge increases if it is to be done right. The proposed 2014 budget asks for \$732 million. Without significantly more money, something Congress would likely be leery of approving, the Global News Network cannot hope to compete with other news entities.

And there is the unresolved question of whether what would emerge under consolidation would really be a news organization. The board and VOA management say the VOA charter is still valid, but a new mission statement in the strategic plan says the goal is "to inform, engage, and connect people around the world *in support of freedom and democracy* [italics added]."

That last phrase is advocacy, not journalism. Regimes around the world—especially hostile ones like Iran—will read that and see VOA as a regime-change instrument of the US government. This formulation not only undercuts VOA's journalistic credibility, it puts VOA correspondents at even greater risk than necessary. I made several trips to Iran to cover events, including the 2005 presidential election. Iranian officials told me they gave visas to VOA Central News correspondents, but not to the

## It's time to fix US broadcasting, or forget it.

Farsi-language service, now called the Persian Service, because the language service is perceived as partisan.

VOA was offered an opportunity to comment on the issues raised in this article, and questions were submitted to the agency for response. It declined to answer any of the questions. The VOA Public Affairs Office's response was: "Frankly speaking, the questions submitted by Mr. Thomas, a former VOA employee, contain multiple errors and suggest a bias that concerns us greatly. We invite those who want to evaluate the quality of VOA journalism to look at our websites or our programs that reach over 135 million people each week in 45 separate languages."

US INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING is at a crossroads. If it is to be a truly dynamic, respected news organization in the 21st-century media market, then several steps must be taken:

- Get rid of the Broadcasting Board of Governors. It has been a disastrous experiment. A January 2013 report by the State Department's Office of Inspector General concluded that, since its inception, the board "has been fully staffed for only seven of its 17 years of existence, and current governors are serving under expired terms." Members have as a rule lacked journalistic credentials, coming from corporate media executive jobs or diplomatic posts. On May 11, President Obama nominated Ryan Crocker to the board, a diplomat who over a 37-year career has served as ambassador to Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Kuwait, Lebanon, and, most recently, Afghanistan. A distinguished record, certainly, but one lacking any journalistic background.

- If a "broadcasting czar" is to oversee the proposed combined operation, then he or she should be someone with an unimpeachable journalistic reputation, not someone who goes through

the revolving door between government spokesman and working journalist. The appointee should be named by the president and subject to Senate confirmation (as VOA directors were before the creation of the BBG), and be appointed for a fixed term (like the FBI director) as additional safeguards against politicization of the news.

- Re-establish the Central News Division as the operational hub of VOA (and, if there is consolidation, of the combined operation) to ensure journalistic cohesion, continuity, and credibility. Having what amounts to dozens of separate news shops competing with one another for resources, stories, and interviews breeds duplication and uncertainty.

- Don't dumb down the news. Without a complete fiscal change of heart in Congress, international broadcasting will never have the money and staff to compete with commercial outlets. So stop focusing undue effort on lightweight fluff that is eroding credibility, and encourage and support intelligent and thoughtful journalism that is unfettered by bureaucracy and politics.

- Stop dismissing radio as a dead medium. Radio remains a highly effective way to reach the many people in remote areas who don't have Internet or TV, and television broadcasting, such as to Iran, is much more easily jammed than radio. The proposed 2014 budget would gut Urdu and Afghan radio services that broadcast to Pakistan and Afghanistan and shut down all Farsi-language radio to Iran.

However, if the mission of US broadcasting is to be "messaging" and policy advocacy, then stop hiding behind the label of journalism. Call it what it is—public diplomacy—and put it under the State Department. Anything less is a disservice to VOA listeners and to the profession of journalism, and an insult to the men and women who strive to uphold the journalistic integrity of Voice of America. **CJR**

---

GARY THOMAS spent 27 years at Voice of America before retiring in 2012. He was a senior correspondent and news analyst specializing in national security and intelligence issues. He served in Islamabad and Bangkok and covered stories throughout South and Southeast Asia.



## Underwritten or undercut?

*Nonprofit funding can't solve our foreign-coverage problem*

NOT LONG AGO, SOME 20 NEWS ORGANIZATIONS DECIDED WHICH FOREIGN NEWS stories should be covered for the American audience. These outlets, from *The New York Times* and major television networks to regional dailies like *The Miami Herald* and *The Boston Globe*, had bureaus around the world and layers of experienced reporters and editors. Today, two nonprofits—the International Reporting Project (IRP) and the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting—are brokering many of these decisions. Together, they employ only a dozen people, yet they have considerable authority over the changing field of US foreign correspondence.

This is a problem, and one that masquerades as a solution to the US media's retreat from foreign coverage. About a third of the foreign correspondents employed by American media outlets in 2003 have been cut. *The New York Times* currently has only three reporters to cover the entire continent of Africa; *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal* each have two; *USA Today* no longer has any.

What has taken their place is a scattering of freelancers, with varying degrees of journalistic seasoning, who go off to cover global crises with little or no institutional support. For them, the IRP and the Pulitzer Center are often the funders of first, and last, resort. Since it was founded in 1998, IRP has paid for the foreign reporting of more than 420 journalists. The Pulitzer Center, which started in 2006, spent nearly \$1 million on story assignments in 2012 alone, resulting in the publication of 250 articles or broadcasts by more than 100 journalists. Each receives the bulk of its funding from donors like the Bill & Melinda Gates, Henry Luce, and Robert R. McCormick foundations.

Both organizations were created to support foreign coverage by regional dailies, under the assumption that big national outlets would continue to have the resources to do their own foreign reporting. Many of the regional papers, however, have shown little interest in generating original international coverage. National outlets still want foreign news, but have eliminated many of their correspondents. As a result, 75 percent of the IRP and Pulitzer Center's 2012 grantees were freelancers who produced stories for a slew of national outlets, including the *Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *PBS NewsHour*, and *The Washington Post*. "The impact of what we do is vastly greater than what I dreamed it would have been six or seven years ago," says Jon Sawyer, the Pulitzer Center's founding director. "So that's a good thing. But what that reflects is the deeper transformation, the crisis, for the industry as a whole."

In many ways, the rise of nonprofit funding has been a godsend for American

journalism. It sustains coverage that would not otherwise be paid for. This has been particularly true for domestic accountability journalism, such as ProPublica's work. When it comes to foreign coverage, though, the subsidy model is, despite the best of intentions, more problematic. It helps perpetuate the low wages paid to reporters, can skew the notion of what's newsworthy, and exacerbates the problem of coverage that is disconnected from the public it is meant to serve.

THE FOUNDERS OF THE PULITZER Center and IRP say their organizations serve a vital role as journalistic buffers between reporters and the foundations that fund their work. Maintaining this autonomy is crucial, they say, during their competitive selection processes. IRP funded 55 reporting projects in 2012, but it received about 600 applications. The Pulitzer Center commissioned 85 projects last year, less than a quarter of its application pool.

While the topical interests of their funders (sanitation, gender issues, food security, maternal mortality, etc.) are reflected in many of the grants they award, Sawyer says that this is a little misleading: "Nearly half of our annual revenue is totally unrestricted. We have the ability to fund projects of merit, on whatever topic."

Still, the staff at IRP and the Pulitzer Center don't play the same role as independent news editors. They aren't governed by the interests of a general readership, and they can't provide the vetting of stories that occurs in a major newsroom. And when small selection committees—four people at IRP and about three at the Pulitzer Center—decide which foreign stories are newsworthy, there is a risk of coverage becoming even more narrow.

On the other hand, for those who say traditional foreign coverage has favored stories of war and pestilence, the increasing influence of nonprofits—and the foundations behind them—provides a counterweight. There are more stories on health, water, and sanitation in the press today, and not because editors are calling for them, says freelancer Jina Moore, days before traveling to Rwanda on an IRP grant. (Moore, who



contributes to CJR, has received three other grants from the Pulitzer Center.)

And nonprofits arguably do more than traditional news outlets to engage the public with global stories. For instance, they sponsor speakers at schools and universities across the country; last year, the Pulitzer Center organized more than 250 public events.

But a broader and more independent foreign news agenda is crucial. "There is only so much foreign news editors want, and only so many articles on, say, Burundi, that a paper will publish," says Moore. "So I worry that the topics foundations push might crowd out other stories. I also worry that, if most of the reporting that this model produces is focused on suffering people in need of 'intervention,' then you have a very distorted picture of a place."

Similarly, a news agenda driven by journalists on the foreign beat, developing expertise over time, is preferable to one in which freelancers parachute in with the clock ticking. Savvy freelancers may follow the region closely online, and do additional reporting that isn't part of their grant, but as Alan Boswell, a McClatchy correspondent who covers East Africa, put it: "They often come in with a plan of what they are going to find, and then they usually leave having found that. That is a bit antithetical to what I consider reporting."

Boswell, whose reporting has been subsidized by the California-based foundation Humanity United (which also funds both IRP and the Pulitzer Center), understands that there is no easy solution. "But there is a reason why editors aren't jumping for NGO stories, and it is the same reason why nobody wakes up and reads the World Food Program's Web articles," he says. "For me, it all boils down to, Who are we writing for?"

IN 1995, PARIS-BASED FREELANCER Deborah Baldwin bemoaned the freelancer's difficulties in living without health insurance or free office supplies. "But to make things worse," she wrote in the *American Journalism Review*, "many magazines and newspapers haven't raised their rates in 15 years; the *San Francisco Chronicle*, for example, pays its Paris correspondent, Alix Christie, \$200 per story."

Eighteen years later, little has changed. Despite the digital age's new opportunities for publishing foreign news (GlobalPost, the websites of *Foreign Policy* and *The Atlantic*), most US outlets, including the *Chronicle*, pay about \$250 for a foreign piece. The IRP and Pulitzer Center cover the logistical

---

## 'For me it all boils down to, Who are we writing for?'

costs for their grantees—flights, accommodations, visas, etc.—but it's up to the news outlets that buy the work to pay the journalist a fee. In fact, the Pulitzer Center's Jon Sawyer says he doesn't consider his organization a subsidiary body: "We view ourselves as a news organization, working to get coverage of global systemic issues and engage the public in those issues. We work to place the pieces in the biggest outlets, but our primary motivation isn't to subsidize those outlets or the freelancers."

Fair enough. But we are left with a piecework model that covers part of what foreign coverage costs, but does not help foster a system that can sustain quality foreign correspondence over time. To be sure, freelancers working through these nonprofits produce some exemplary work. Photojournalist Micah Albert, for instance, my co-grantee on a recent Pulitzer Center-supported project in Kenya, just was awarded the prestigious World Press Photo of the Year for Contemporary Issues for his work on that assignment. But most young reporters can't support themselves with this model, and they aren't getting the mentoring that can help them develop as correspondents.

Samuel Loewenberg, a veteran correspondent who has reported from Africa, Latin America, and Europe with the help of Pulitzer Center grants, says the foundation-supported model has become crucial to his work, but that it's not a replacement for all the cuts. "We have lost so many editors and

reporters who brought such a depth of knowledge and level of craft to foreign reporting," he says. "I did some of my best stories for regional papers, but those days are over."

The staffers at the IRP and Pulitzer Center are aware of these limitations. "The issue that needs to be resolved is how can we keep this model sustainable and ensure journalistic standards?" says John Schidlovsky, the founding director of the IRP and former foreign correspondent for *The Baltimore Sun*.

Tom Hundley, the Pulitzer Center's senior editor and a former foreign correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*, is more blunt: "This great mass of freelancers who are depending on grants from us and working on pitiful fees from brand-name outlets—I mean, this just isn't going to work."

The answer of how to ensure the future of high-quality foreign coverage is not easy or obvious. Sawyer says his organization is part of a transition, but isn't sure to what. "The role that we can play is trying out models, to see what might work," he says. "I understand the temptation to say that these efforts are insufficient, that they do not replace the jobs lost by staff cutbacks or guarantee a sustainable income for freelancers. If we had more dollars we could definitely do more. But it's worth recognizing what has been achieved."

Sawyer, Schidlovsky, and their colleagues note that stories on systemic global issues have never been profitable; they are a public service, but not likely to generate ad sales or subscribers by themselves. In other words, they argue, foreign news has always been subsidized in some way.

The concern, though, is not the loss of foreign news, but the loss of US foreign correspondence as a profession—people whose full-time job it is to bring us that news. The subsidy model, for all the good it is doing in the short term, may make it harder to rebuild a system that supports that kind of commitment to foreign news. **CJR**

---

DAVID CONRAD is a freelance journalist and doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. Some of his foreign assignments have been underwritten by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

## Future tense

### *Can Afghanistan's press survive without the West's support?*

IN THE SUMMER OF 2012, MELON CROPS IN AFGHANISTAN'S NORTHERN KUNDUZ province were nearly wiped out by a bacterial disease. Ninety percent of the farmers in the region suffered economic loss. A local reporter from the Salam Watandar radio station reported the story, and it later was featured in a national broadcast of *Farm Talk*, a weekly call-in program not unlike an Afghan version of NPR's *Car Talk*, only the subjects are pesticides and irrigation, not overheating motors and squeaky brakes.

In Kabul, a deputy at the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock heard the broadcast and was shocked. The agency oversees a sector that produces about 27 percent of the national GDP, but this was the first time the overly centralized government had heard of the crop devastation in the northern province.

The ministry immediately gave Kunduz farmers pesticides for the following year's crops, which are now expected to achieve a near full recovery.

American readers may shrug off such a story of media influence. But Salam Watandar's role in giving the Kunduz farmers' plight a voice in Kabul highlights the remarkable emergence of Afghanistan's media sector as a player in the embattled country's political and social arenas. A decade ago, the Taliban controlled Afghanistan's only radio station, which broadcast nothing but regime-approved religious programming. Today, there are so many radio stations in Kabul that it is impossible for startups to find an available frequency. By most estimates, there are approximately 150 radio stations, 60 television broadcasters (some have licenses but aren't broadcasting), and more than 240 newspapers and magazines in a country of 31 million people.

The media's rapid growth can be attributed to a huge influx of foreign funding, mostly from the US Agency for International Development, but also from Europe and Japan. To date, USAID has given more than \$70 million for startup costs and training of Afghan media professionals since 2002. Separately, the US Embassy in Kabul has shelled out some \$99 million for media development since 2010 alone.

The result is an active press corps that, though hardly a robust Fourth Estate yet, is definitely making the powerful take notice. Press conferences are lively and many Afghan reporters aren't afraid to ask government officials tough questions. President Hamid Karzai points to the thriving Afghan media and its role in the country's emerging democracy as one of the greatest successes of his two terms.

But there are fears that could change after 2014, when the bulk of NATO troops are scheduled to leave Afghanistan—along with much of the international support. While the international community insists that it's not abandoning the country,

large-scale development funding has already decreased from its peak in 2010.

Afghan journalists worry that they are not ready to go it alone. "The concern is that once the troops leave, the economy will decrease—or, God forbid, collapse—which will affect the country across the board, including the media," says Lotfullah Najafizada, the head of current affairs at ToloNews.

ToloNews, a 24-hour news channel, is part of the Moby Group, Afghanistan's first major media conglomerate. The group started with Afghanistan's first independent radio station, Arman FM, after the fall of the Taliban. USAID provided \$270,000 for the station's startup in 2002. That was coupled with about \$300,000 from the Mohseni family, Afghan businessmen who had returned to Kabul after living in Australia during the Taliban years.

Moby is now a global enterprise, and has a deal with Rupert Murdoch to produce the Farsi1 television channel in Dubai. Moby's commercial station, Tolo TV, is hugely popular thanks to the original serial dramas and foreign soap operas it airs.

But Moby is an exception. Media outlets that were born as part of a broader development program that has been funded almost entirely by international donors, will struggle without that support, says Najafizada. Of particular concern is the potential loss of community radio stations, which have brought news and information, and provided a voice, to rural regions like Kunduz. In a country where illiteracy rates hover around 39 percent for men and 13 percent for women, stations such as Salam Watandar have proven vital to engaging communities that otherwise see insurgent groups doing more to help them than their government in Kabul.

USAID helped launch Salam Watandar in 2003. It now has 60 regional affiliates across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan. Ninety percent of the network's revenue comes from grants from the international community. The rest comes from ad sales to Afghan banks and telecommunication companies, the nation's most active advertisers.

As economic pressures mount, the network is looking for ways to cut costs without closing stations. "The danger

of losing local stations," says Nasir Maimanagy, the network's managing director, "is that a lack of information feeds the insurgency, which will take advantage of the situation."

In short, community radio is "good for democracy," says Najiba Ayubi, the director of the Killid Group, which owns eight radio stations and two magazines. Like Moby and Salam Watan-dar, Killid was started in 2002 with money from USAID and others. In the last year, Killid has gone through a series of layoffs and cost-cutting to stay afloat. Ayubi says the group, which now relies on both grants and ad revenue, is stable—for the moment, at least. "If the grant-based media isn't creative at this time, then they will have no means to survive," she says.

With the 2014 deadline looming, most of the country's independent media are looking for ways to increase revenue. The international donor community is also changing the focus of its grants, emphasizing marketing training designed to help stations and newspapers do just that. Too many of the Afghan media outlets are trying to "be everything to everybody," says Masha Hamilton, the director of communications and public diplomacy at the US Embassy in Kabul. They should focus on their core audience, she says, and market themselves accordingly.

If the country's independent media collapse, there is a real danger that a politically partisan media will emerge to fill the gap. Already, a number of outlets are owned by Afghan warlords or polarizing ethnic leaders. More worrying, some say, is the influence that neighboring Pakistan and Iran have on Afghanistan's media. Abdul Mujeeb Khalvatgar, the executive director of NAI, an Afghan nonprofit that both trains journalists and lobbies the government on behalf of the media, estimates that Iran controls at least four of the 60 Afghan television broadcasters. "They are literally sending news packages to the station in which the reporters are referring not to the 'leader of Iran' or 'the president of Iran,' but simply to 'the leader,'" Khalvatgar says.

ToloNews's Najafizada suggests that Iran and Pakistan are simply trying to replicate the success the US and

## Investigative stories bring murky threats and official harassment.

other Western nations have had getting their democracy-building messages out through grant-funded media in Afghanistan. "When people are dropping bags of cash off at the president's palace, you shouldn't be surprised when you see that others are also trying to influence Afghan media," Najafizada says. (In late April, President Karzai confirmed a *New York Times* report that CIA agents were bringing cash to the president's palace as part of monthly payments to influence the Afghan government.)

Even without the outside interference, journalists must contend with the consequences of their reporting. Afghanistan, after all, is not a place where the powerful are used to dealing with nosy reporters. In January, the country's leading daily newspaper, *Hasht-e Sobh*, published an article based on government documents that named more than 300 former ministers, parliament members, and influential citizens involved in claiming land they did not own. It was a big story, and showed what serious investigative reporting could do.

The day the story appeared, the reporter, Akbar Rostami, and his editor in chief, Parwiz Kawa, received threatening phone calls. And men who refused to identify themselves showed up at the newspaper's office demanding to speak to the editor. When they were turned away, they asked for detailed information about the office's security systems. Kawa called the police, and that night two armed officers were stationed at the newsroom.

Two months later, Rostami produced another report that revealed corruption in the Ministry of Mines, based on hundreds of pages of leaked documents. Both Rostami and Kawa again received threatening, anonymous phone calls. In April, Kawa was called to the attorney general's office to face a complaint from the mining minister. According to Afghanistan's 2009 Media Law, the

attorney general does not have the authority to summon journalists to answer a complaint until a special regulatory commission investigates. In this case, Kawa says, the protocol was not followed. "Karzai has said that freedom of speech has been his biggest success, but that's not true because there are people in his government who are creating laws restricting access to information," Rostami says, referring to an amendment proposed last year to the Media Law that contained vague language limiting the media's ability to cover subjects that would jeopardize national security or Islamic values. Parliament has since shelved the amendment.

Violent attacks against journalists have increased, too, according to NAI's Khalvatgar. From January to May of this year, 41 incidents of violence against journalists—including three deaths—were registered, compared with 21 during the same period last year. Seventy percent of those incidents were categorized as government pressure on a journalist. The others were threats, physical harassment, or beatings.

Some observers attribute the increased violence to growing tension before the 2014 election to select Karzai's successor as president. "The attacks on the media will get worse because politicians don't want to face problems from the media, such as the *Hasht-e Sobh* reports," says Faheem Dashty, who runs Afghanistan's National Journalist Union.

In the *Hasht-e Sobh* newsroom, Rostami says he's not deterred. He acknowledges that the stress of the past several months has caused him to lose a lot of weight, but he's at work on more investigations, which he plans to file in the coming weeks.

Kawa, his editor, is equally determined, despite the looming revenue problems his and other media outlets are facing. "We're encouraged by the response we've gotten on the reports," he says. "If I could afford to hire four more full-time investigative reporters, I would be able to publish a report like this every week." **CJR**

---

SABRA AYRES teaches journalism at the American University of Afghanistan. She is a former Moscow correspondent for *Cox Newspapers*.





# Lighten up

How satire will make American politics relevant again

BY DANNAGAL G. YOUNG

In spring 1998, as a senior political science major at the University of New Hampshire, I took a transformative course on media and politics. The main text, W. Lance Bennett's *News: The Politics of Illusion*, became my bible. I started to see that my twenty-something cynicism toward media and politics was at least in part driven by institutional problems within the news: Media deregulation of the '80s and '90s had increased pressure on the news industry to cut costs and maximize profits, thereby reducing investigative reporting and foreign coverage. The resulting pressures had

also led to an emphasis on news that was overdramatic, hyper-personalized, fragmented, and supportive of the existing social order. On top of all this, political professionals had learned how to use these constraints to their advantage, increasing the role of handlers and spin machines in the deliberate construction of political issues and images through the news.

Over the course of the semester, I became appropriately outraged. I sipped my latté with anticipation as I got to Bennett's last chapter: "Freedom from the press: Solutions for concerned citizens." "Proposals for citizens," it read. "Become better informed by decoding the news." Sounds good. We have to become critical news consumers. But how?

Bennett outlined five recommendations, ranging from discounting standard story formulas to paying attention to stray facts and recognizing spin. And finally, urged Bennett, citizens could seek out "additional sources of information" and run "independent checks on various claims."

Sounds awful. Politics is dominated by spin, the news media aren't adequately explaining the important issues of the day ... and now the burden is on *me*?

To be fair, Bennett also had recommendations for politicians and journalists, but there was no avoiding the idea that as a citizen, my best option to counter the deleterious effects of this news-politics mess was to think harder, look more carefully, and read more.

Cut to 2007: I was attending the annual meeting of the National Communication Association in Chicago. Overconfident from learning that Bennett had recently cited a study of mine in defense of the political satire of Jon Stewart, I told him my concerns about the last chapter of his book. Specifically, I told him that it read like it was written by a single, childless male with lots of time on his hands.

Fortunately, he laughed. And then he admitted that when he wrote those recommendations, he was just that.

Over the following months, through email correspondence, Bennett and I discussed alternative solutions to the problematic political-information landscape; accessible—even enjoyable—ways for citizens to demystify political discourse and help keep politicians and media institutions accountable; ways that wouldn't frustrate and overburden citizens.

Chief among them? Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.

FOUR NIGHTS A WEEK ON COMEDY CENTRAL, *THE COLBERT Report* and its mother ship *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, use parody and irony to criticize politicians, political processes, and the mediated news environment. The two shows recently celebrated their eighth consecutive quarter as the top-rated, late-night talk shows among numerous key demographics (including the coveted youngest, and male-est: adults 18–24 and men 18–24). With between 1.9 and 2.5 million viewers each night, plus the largest online



viewership of all the late-night shows, Stewart and Colbert have the potential for significant reach and influence.

Their "late-night talk show" label notwithstanding, both shows break the rules of the genre by consistently treating politics in the context of entertainment, and by the divergent sources of critical acclaim they have received through the years. Between them, the two programs have won 20 Emmy and four Peabody awards, and *The Daily Show* has received Television Critics Association awards

---

In 1985, Neil Postman said TV 'devastated political discourse.' Imagine what Postman, now deceased, would have said when Stewart asked President Obama, 'How many times a week does Biden show up in a wet bathing suit to a meeting?'

for Outstanding Achievement in Comedy and Outstanding Achievement in News and Information.

In spite of the commercial success and critical acclaim, Stewart and Colbert's contributions to our political discourse are still under debate. On the one hand are scholars, journalists, and viewers who see these shows as an accessible and important source of political understanding and inspiration. On the other are critics who worry that the humorous treatment of serious political issues and events will trivialize them and foster even more cynicism about our political institutions and processes than already exists. "Our specific charge is that Mr. Stewart has engaged in unbridled political cynicism," wrote Roderick Hart, dean of the College of Communication at the University of Texas, and his then-doctoral student, Johanna Hartelius, in a 2007 essay entitled "The Political Sins of Jon Stewart." Ted Koppel lamented, to Stewart's face, that "a lot of television viewers—more, quite frankly, than I am comfortable with—get their news from . . . *The Daily Show*" (a dismayingly common observation that is not supported by the data; *Daily Show* viewers tend to be avid political junkies consuming myriad news sources).

This argument reflects a broader strain of media criticism that sees television—and entertainment television in particular—as unsuitable for the treatment of serious political issues. Writing in 1985, Neil Postman went so far as to claim that television, as a medium, had "devastated political discourse" through its focus on diversion over substance and artifice over truth. (Imagine what Postman, who died in 2003, would have said when Stewart interviewed President Obama on his show in 2012 and asked him, "How many times a week does Biden show up in a wet bathing suit to a meeting?")

But the argument misunderstands our relationship with the mediated political world, and underestimates citizens. Not only is political satire not "devastating" to political discourse, it actually encourages and models promising new ways for people to connect with politics.

Consider the 2010 Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear on the National Mall, organized and hosted by Stewart and Colbert. This "Million Moderate March" mobilized more than 250,000 fans of the shows around a communal need for political connection, participation—and fun.

Or Stewart's interviews with GOP officials, in which he asks his guests to explain their point of view, and then to explain "why he is wrong" on a particular issue, thereby shunning the he said-she said objectivity trap of typical pundit shows in favor of an actual exchange of ideas.

Or Colbert's launching of the Colbert Super Fun Pack, "A Do it Yourself Super PAC kit that you can order. All you need is a burning desire for civic engagement and \$99." The limited edition packages (only 1,000 were distributed) included the legal documents necessary to file for a super PAC, a how-to-file instruction manual, a

host of super PAC-related swag, a copy of *The Forbes* 400 list of the richest people in America, and a series of seemingly arbitrary objects that, once properly decoded as clues, led to an actual treasure. (How fun is that?)

The popularity of Stewart and Colbert in our cultural zeitgeist is not accidental. A growing number of scholars see the shows' resonance as an indication of the need for solutions to the problems plaguing contemporary politics and news.

As the line between journalism and entertainment blurred and profit pressures mounted, political coverage became even more about personalities and ginned-up drama instead of substantive issues. Now, on the rare occasions when an actual policy debate does break out, it is left to a handful of polarized pundits who argue in talking points and generalities that go largely unchallenged by the journalists serving as referees. All this leaves normal citizens cynical and alienated.

As the scholar Geoffrey Baym has shown, while the traditional news business was breaking down, cable and the Internet were creating new platforms that allowed for programming experimentation. Suddenly, satirists like Jon Stewart had the freedom (afforded by basic cable) and the inspiration (afforded by journalism's devolution) to create an innovative response to the state of the news industry.

In fact, earlier this year, Stewart lambasted the suggestion by Jeff Zucker, the newly minted president of CNN Worldwide, that "we need to broaden [the] definition of what news is." Stewart, impersonating Zucker in an exaggerated Hollywood Executive voice, proclaimed, "No longer will news be defined as things that *are* or *have* happened in the world. For instance, I love that show *CSI* . . . why can't *that* be news? I love brunch, who doesn't love brunch?"

## Funny follows

Was it William Shakespeare or @wise\_kaplan who said, "Brevity is the soul of wit"? In either case, of Twitter it might be more accurate to say, "Wit is the soul of brevity." The 140-character microblogging platform is where today's working journalists not only live and breathe, but also grin and guffaw. Twitter is where they go for the latest scoops and to break news, but, just as essentially, for comic relief and to crack wise.

CJR asked some journalists who are active on Twitter (and hilarious in their own right) whom they follow for a reliable laugh.



**David Corn** (@DavidCornDC), DC editor of *Mother Jones*

@pourmecoffee «First, they came for the masturbators and I said nothing because, well I said nothing it's not important why»

@OTooleFan «Dear Bob Woodward: When you go on HANNITY to plead your case, it's over, buddy. Time for your fruit cup.»

@AlbertBrooks «I just found out Iron Man is not a true story. Bummer.»

@SpeakerBoehner «Jobs continue to be our number one priority»



**Emma Carmichael** (@emmacargo), editor of *The Hairpin*

@HellDudeREAL «YOUR PULSE IS A DDDDDDD, I'M ABOUT TO END IT " @liaamal: this problem... again? -- the hell dude"»

@THEKIDMERO «NOBODY MORE HYPE TO TELL YOU THEY STATUS THAN ATHEISTS AND VEGANS B. NOBODY.»

@hamiltonnolan «Outlaw Ivy League athletics.»

@laura\_june «Remember before you could swim and you had to wear those dumb things on your arms. Lol.»

@netw3rk «Zach Randolph runs like he's having an argument with running.»



**Matt Cooper** (@mattcoop), editor and correspondent for *National Journal*

@delrayser «Maybe if we rename the poor, the unemployed, and minorities "Benghazi" we can trick the GOP into actually caring about them.»

@WeeLaura «Rupert Murdoch just retweeted Deepak Chopra. Take me now, Lord.»

@jimcaffigan «Next time I have to cry in an acting scene I'm just going to imagine a world without everything bagels.»

@pourmecoffee «When they figure out how to 3D print outrage, there will be no need for Twitter anymore.»



**Rachel Sklar** (@rachelsklar), media writer and entrepreneur

@KMaverick «We as a society are not ready for self serve checkout.»

@AllanaHarkin «My children in the car: "Mommy, why did you call that guy a juice-bag?"»

@iamsambie «Sometimes I catch my own reflection and think "I would have made a terrific Pilgrim."»

@jenafriedman «I just need to learn how to open a jar, then I can be alone forever!»



**Chris Moody** (@Chris\_Moody), political reporter for Yahoo News

@iowahawkblog «Breaking: Eric Holder arrests self in DOJ sting; releases self after forgetting to read self Miranda rights»

@EvanMcSan «free idea for jeopardy category: "things that are fettered"»

@elisefoley «Pretty sure I think way too much about varying my "mhmms", "right"s, "okay"s and "sure"s on phone interviews.»

@delrayser «If Jon Karl ever tries to tell you he slept with someone he probably means she read him the plot of a porno over the phone.»



**Ann Friedman** magazine editor and CJR columnist

@BoobsRadley «The pain of childbirth seems like an OK trade off for how great it feels to take to your bra off.»

@colsonwhitehead «I can do The Robot or write another page...or I can do The Robot \*while\* I write another page!»

@robbdelaney «If you got belts for being good at sex, the sensei would probably cover my whole body in a suit made of black belts, exposing only my tongue»

@bessbell «Naming your kid "Peyton" is a great way to let people know you wish you married a richer guy.»



**Daniel Victor** (@bydanielvictor), *New York Times* social-media editor

@mkramer «Why did 14 people I don't know friend me on Facebook tonight? Why am I on Facebook? Why did I just use friend as a verb?»

@Elahelzadi «Hey, father of the gif, we're using a hard G. Some parents want their kids to be doctors, and they end up going to film school. Let it go»

@michaelroston «Working on a spec script for my new Food Network show: Slaw & Order»

@harrisj «A TV show about an itinerant PR man who rides the plains, looking for brands in trouble that need a hand.»

@mjjenkins «Not surprisingly, New York City on a rainy day is not ideal for learning to use crutches.»

@rkearney «If I'm a @nytimes subscriber, and I'm signed in, maybe don't turn the whole homepage into a Jaguar ad in which some guy throws keys at me.»

That's news!" Stewart then presented a montage of CNN's latest journalistic contributions: "superfluous technology," like goat holograms and virtual floating rockets; a crime-scene investigator walking the viewer through a dramatic re-enactment of convicted murderer Jodi Arias's brutal stabbing of Travis Alexander, complete with a dummy face-down in a pool of fake blood.

### What do the numbers say?

As cultural scholars and pundits on both sides of this debate describe the ways in which satire and irony might help transform democracy, quantitative social scientists like me, handcuffed by the constraints of empiricism, set out to test the various claims. Through survey research and controlled experiments, humor scholars have spent more than a decade studying how citizens—undergrads and normal people—perceive, process, and are affected by political satire.

---

Wouldn't someone with low trust in government but extensive political knowledge and confidence in her ability to participate effectively (all of which one gets from watching Stewart and Colbert) be skeptical, passionate, and engaged? Probably.

The results would make Neil Postman cringe. Fans of political satire consistently exhibit exceptionally healthy democratic characteristics compared to non-viewers: People who watch Stewart and Colbert participate in politics more; they vote more; they discuss politics with friends and family more; they watch cable news more; they get news online more; they listen to NPR more; and—this is a good one—they have more confidence in their ability to understand and participate in political life. And studies consistently indicate that exposure to political satire increases knowledge of current events, leads to further information-seeking on related topics, and increases viewer interest in and attention paid to politics and news.

The one documented effect of political satire that has raised some eyebrows is a negative relationship between exposure to *The Daily Show* and *Colbert* and trust in the government. Avid consumers of political satire have lower trust in the government, regardless of who is in office. While the authors of the initial study that identified this relationship, Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris, political scientists at East Carolina University, described it as a "detrimental effect," many scholars have since pointed out that low political trust combined with high knowledge and efficacy likely constitutes a desirable democratic concoction.

After all, wouldn't someone with low trust in government

but extensive political knowledge and confidence in her ability to participate effectively, be skeptical, passionate, and engaged? Probably.

### The healthy citizen

In exploring how these shows affect democracy, researchers like me have had to reconsider what healthy democratic citizenship ought to look like. Does citizenship have to involve a certain kind of policy-based knowledge or town-hall-meeting attendance? Do citizens have to watch traditional news and treat politics with a kind of due reverence? Perhaps there are viable models of citizenship that emphasize skepticism, playfulness, passion, and an emotional connection to the political process—ways of engaging with politics that aren't so serious, or difficult.

American definitions of citizenship have evolved. In his 1998 book *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*, sociologist Michael Schudson documents the changing norms surrounding American citizenship. He points to the liquor-fueled celebrations of the 1700s and the raucous, party-based participatory culture of the 1800s. He reminds us that today's rational model of citizenship—in which citizens are expected to become policy experts and dispassionate political participants—has not always been with us, but rather is an outgrowth of the Progressive movement of the 1890s. Suspicious of the emotional whims of the public, and concerned about the voters' vulnerability to the manipulation of powerful political parties, Mugwump progressives sought to protect the political process from these dubious forces. Through changes in the ballot system, and an increasing emphasis on literacy over festival, the "Protestant Reformation" of American politics took place.

Translation: They sucked the fun out.

As Schudson colorfully describes, "Mugwump reformers were not keen on wild and woolly party democracy with its elevation of the election to an extraordinary collective carnivalesque ritual. Carnival was not their style."

Schudson, who teaches at the Columbia Journalism School, does not advocate for one model of citizenship over another, as each of these eras was plagued by different threats to democratic health. But his reminder that rational, staid political discourse and participation are cultural constructions, not a fixed reality, allows us to consider some functional alternatives.

To date, most quantitative studies of the impact of *Colbert* and *The Daily Show* have been rooted in rational political science, the un-fun Mugwump model of citizenship. We tend to ask respondents the old (sometimes 60-year-old) National Election Studies questions like, "Do you know how much of a majority is necessary for Congress to override a presidential veto?" (to measure civics knowledge), and, "Did you try to persuade someone whom to vote for?" and "Did you donate money?" (to measure political participation). Though there

is evidence of a Stewart-Colbert effect when looking at these rational constructs, imagine what we will find if we begin to ask questions that better capture the spirit of what political humor really does for its viewers.

For example, when analyzing the impact of political satire, Jeffrey Jones, director of the George Foster Peabody Awards at the University of Georgia, suggests we should consider how viewers use political satire and parody to connect with politics and find meaning in political issues. Colbert and Stewart, Jones says, present political stories and issues in a way that is accessible and appealing, making viewers feel more connected to politics and empowered to think about it in an active and playful way.

The idea of measuring something as squishy as “play” or “connection” might send quantitative scholars running. However, several recent studies suggest that these outcomes are real and can be captured through innovations in measurement and analysis.

For a forthcoming article in the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, my colleague Paul Brewer and I looked at how college students’ prior exposure to *The Colbert Report* affected their later exposure to traditional news stories. Participants read news stories about the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision and super PACs, a topic with which Colbert dealt extensively over a period of months on his program. They were randomly assigned either a story that mentioned Colbert’s super PAC, a news story about super PACs that did not mention Colbert, or a control. What we found, among other things, was that those students who were avid viewers of *The Colbert Report* in real life experienced dramatic increases in their sense of political efficacy when exposed to traditional news stories about super PACs (regardless of whether those stories mentioned Colbert). Their prior exposure to *The Colbert Report* armed them with information and awareness that made them feel more confident in their ability to navigate our complicated political world.

Another soon-to-be-released study that I conducted of college students’ reasons for watching (or avoiding) shows like *The Daily Show* and *Colbert* suggests that viewers’ uses for these programs do not fit neatly into an entertainment-or-information dichotomy. While some viewers reported watching *The Daily Show* and *Colbert* as “sources” of news, or as “sources” of laughter, a large proportion of respondents said they watched the shows to find the humor or joy in information they had obtained elsewhere. Similarly, a smaller contingent of respondents reported using *The Daily Show* and *Colbert* as sources of context to help them create meaning out of information they already had.

And in a forthcoming article in *American Behavioral Scientist*, my coauthors and I argue that as the possibilities for political entertainment expand, our age-old measures of the effects of political and media satire are ill-suited to capture the significance of what is going on around us. Consider the proliferation of viral videos and online political memes during the 2012 presidential campaign. The explosive popularity of memes like the Tumblr “Texts from Hillary,” or the candidate videos from “Bad Lip Reading,” speaks to the resonance

of entertaining political content. These memes and videos do not necessarily make an explicit political argument, nor do they necessarily provide political information in the traditional sense. But they clearly matter to people. They provide a state of play where the audience can engage with public officials, political issues, or events, and not feel judged or inadequate in their ability to understand what’s going on.

And most important: This playful space isn’t a realm that exists separate from politics; for most people, this *is* politics.

### Why are we afraid to tear down these boundaries?

Our reluctance to make political discourse more accessible stems, in part, from elitist notions of who should be allowed to sit at the political table. I remember watching *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher* in 1999. As an appropriately trained political science graduate, I hated this show, almost to the point of finding it morally offensive. Who are these cracker jacks? What right do these comedians and B-list actors have to talk about abortion or gun control? As I read more of Jeffrey Jones’s work, though, in which he highlights *Politically Incorrect* as an example of inclusive, non-elite political discourse, I had to acknowledge that my contempt for Maher’s show probably said far more about me and my formal political-science training than it did about the show’s value. Actual democratic discourse requires that even the cracker jacks be invited to the table.

There are also Mugwumpian concerns among political communication scholars and political journalists about the vulnerability of the public: those poor, unprotected masses. The rather paternalistic fear is that if we allow political decision-making to become driven primarily by emotions, rather than careful thought and analysis, it will be far easier for the public to be manipulated by powerful interests and its own base instincts.

Leaders have always capitalized on emotions, of course. Today’s politicians and operatives routinely appeal to things like patriotism, fear—even “hope and change”—to mobilize and persuade voters.

On one level, this fear of emotional politics makes sense. History is full of extreme examples of what can go wrong when the masses are politically stirred through emotional appeals. Think Hitler, the KKK, the Salem witch trials.

But history is also full of examples of important victories born of citizens’ emotional responses to the political realities around them: civil rights, the American Revolution, suffrage. And the desire to “protect” the public by rationalizing and intellectualizing politics may strip it of the very things that draw people to politics in the first place: passion, meaning, and connection.

People act when they feel. If we want people to participate, we’ll need to allow, and even encourage, them to connect to politics not just through their heads, but also through their hearts.

And it probably isn’t possible to take emotion out of the political process, even if we wanted to. Is thinking, as opposed to feeling, ever truly rational? Cognitive psychology tells us that, while thoughts can lead to emotional responses, our emotional responses also shape how and what we think.



The relationship between the rational and the emotional is complicated and reciprocal.

For example: You favor gun control. You learn that a candidate opposes gun control (thought/belief) so you then dislike that candidate (emotional response). What a nice, rational process. But this also works the other way: You favor gun control. You dislike a candidate—for whatever reason (emotional response)—so you then assume that the candidate opposes gun control (thought/belief). We are sneaky beasts, always on a mission to protect our own egos and the integrity of our belief systems. When

---

If Stewart and Colbert have taught us anything, it's that we cannot survive on a diet of ideological punditry, goat holograms, and fear-mongering (or what Stewart has referred to as "the country's 24-hour, political-pundit, perpetual-panic conflictinator").

emotions are strong, we generally don't let inconvenient new information rock the boat. In sum, we all practice Stephen Colbert's principle of *truthiness*: We want to feel right in our gut, without letting facts get in the way of what we *know* is true.

So in terms of receiving messages, the integrity of rational, information-based politics is suspect. But what about the message-production side of the equation? Sadly, the story is not much better. We live in a mediated political environment that is so thoroughly professionalized, with crafted talking points and poll-driven frames, there is little reason to assume that "information" is more truthful or less vulnerable to emotional manipulation than so-called entertainment.

When interest groups and campaigns actively construct reality, those things that we would like to think are true or fixed—dare I say, facts—are still run through a meat grinder. Political players select and frame issues and events, and journalists—bound by their own professional and systemic constraints (objectivity, the nonstop news cycle, etc.)—produce a second reconstruction of those issues and events. Then, upon reaching its destination (a.k.a. the good citizen), this information gets mashed through a cognitive funhouse fueled by self-serving and ego-protective biases like selective attention and selective perception.

So much for the Mugwumps.

Increasingly, scholars of political entertainment are challenging the notion that this process is worth protecting from the bastardizing influences of emotion, humor, and fun; especially if rationalizing politics means leaving normal people alienated from the language and rituals of politics. As

Princeton political scientist Markus Prior's work has consistently demonstrated, the more outlets and channels people have to choose from, the greater the opportunity for politically disinterested people to drop out of politics altogether, leaving them uninformed and at home on Election Day.

The key is in finding ways to show citizens that politics is not separate from their lives. Politics is people. People are social, emotional, and playful. We want to connect with our world and with each other, and enjoy doing it.

If scholars and journalists insist on treating political issues and public policy as part of a separate, elite sphere, devoid of passion and play, citizens will see those issues and policy debates as irrelevant and alienating. But if we empower people with ways to identify and create their own emotional connections to the substantive political issues of the day, we might find that they are not so quick to drop out.

Stewart and Colbert provide a functional model that should encourage further innovation in the exploration and discussion of politics and public affairs. Not as a substitute for the arduous, time-consuming work of investigative journalism, of course. If Stewart and Colbert have taught us anything, it's that we cannot survive on a diet of ideological punditry, goat holograms, and fear-mongering (or what Stewart has referred to as "the country's 24-hour, political-pundit, perpetual-panic conflictinator"). So, yes, we need the meat of great public-service journalism. But there is still room, and a need, for creative new formats that encourage people to connect and play with the substance of politics in accessible and meaningful ways.

We may find that by empowering citizens with entertaining ways to identify and cultivate their own meaningful connections to public policy, they will be less vulnerable to strategic emotional manipulation by campaigns and interest groups. Imagine that. What if the best way to rationalize the democratic process, protect citizens, and get more people to participate is by encouraging people to become passionate and playful?

I wonder if the Mugwumps were wrong about the liquor, too?

IN PREPARATION FOR THIS ARTICLE, I CALLED LANCE BENNETT to discuss his current thoughts on political satire as a response to the failings of postmodern news. He brought my attention to the most recent edition of *News: The Politics of Illusion*.

You can imagine my delight when I turned to the final chapter outlining proposals for citizens, and read: "Find Sources of Perspective such as Political Comedy." **CJR**

---

DANNAGAL G. YOUNG is an assistant professor of communication at the University of Delaware and a research fellow at the university's Center for Political Communication. She has been a professional improvisational comedian with ComedySportz in Philadelphia for 14 years.



# Eye's up

Ian Hislop explains why *Private Eye*'s blend of humor and investigative journalism wouldn't work in the US

Britain's bestselling current-affairs magazine, *Private Eye*, has been producing its biweekly and decidedly English mix of satire, industry gossip, cartoons, and investigative journalism since 1961. Despite its print-focused operation (there is no digital version, and its website offers just tidbits of what's available in the print edition), the magazine's 200,000-plus circulation is the highest it's been in recent years, buoyed by its recent 50th-anniversary issue and various government and media scandals. Much of the success is due to editor **Ian Hislop**, 52, who's been at the helm since 1986. A self-professed workaholic, Hislop also writes for and appears on television, most famously as a panelist on the BBC's long-running comedic news panel show, *Have I Got News For You*. As his profile has risen over the years, Hislop has become a regular on various power and influence lists, from *The Guardian* to *GQ*, and has been called "the king of British satire" and even a "national treasure." *CJR's Sara Morrison* spoke to Hislop about mixing satire and seriousness, and why American publications and TV shows either don't or can't.

**How is *Private Eye* able to balance hard news and investigations with humor and satire?** One of the reasons why *Private Eye* has survived so long is that what we combine is jokes about things you know, and information about things you don't know. Hard news is pretty hard to sell; investigative journalism is expensive, it takes a long time, and people find it quite difficult on the whole.

But the great thing about the *Eye* is the people who were doing it always knew that. Our greatest investigative journalist was Paul Foot, who's a brilliant figure, but he always used to say, "Oh well, people read my stuff at the back of the *Eye* after they've read the jokes and they're on the loo and there's nothing left to read." Which is typical Paul self-deprecation. But he's got a point.

The great thing about a magazine that's left lying around is that you buy it because you find the cover funny, and you

think the cartoons are funny when you're younger and that's the thing you read first. And then, as you get older and you get a job, you start thinking, "Oh god, they're writing about us!" And then the whole thing starts becoming more and more relevant. So I think it's this trying to do two things that explains why we've managed to last when a lot of other print has had trouble.

**America tends to put people in categories: In this corner is our "serious journalist" and over here is our "silly satirist." Those lines are much blurrier in England. Why is that?** The audience knows what they're getting. Or can discern what they're getting. They don't think that because he attempts to be funny about current affairs it means he doesn't know anything. On the contrary, you're presumed here to have a sufficient background. Almost a proviso for making those jokes.

If I'm going to go and be a smart-ass about education policy, then I'd better have read some books. I'd better have a view on how to teach history if I'm going to say [Secretary of State for Education Michael] Gove's view of teaching history is a little bit insular. So, oddly, it isn't a problem for people here. I certainly seem to get away with it without anyone saying, "Well, what's he on for?"

**American audiences have trouble accepting hard news and humor in the same publication. You're either *ProPublica* or you're *The Onion*.** Yes, I don't know why that is. I remember reading *The Onion* and thinking, "Well, that's very funny, those items. Um, where's the rest of the paper?" The Journalism with a big J is very straight-faced, and investigative journalism is very, very serious and very, very important.

*Private Eye* has investigative journalism in the back, and lots and lots of, essentially, professional gossip. You know, people in the agricultural business, people in medicine, people in the energy business basically telling you what's going

on in their worlds. But a lot of them do it slightly tongue-in-cheek, and, I hope, write it in an entertaining way. So if the oil tariffs are being fiddled this week, then you don't get a graph and a lecture. You get some names and you get some fingers pointed at who is taking the money.

Irreverence is something that I think Americans often don't understand. Not because they're unsophisticated but they just think, "Why are you being so rude?"

**You've "rudely" gone after guests on *Have I Got News For You*, calling former Prime Minister Tony Blair's press secretary/director of communications Alistair Campbell a war criminal, for example, when he guest-hosted the show last year. Campbell, barely ruffled, eventually silenced your attacks by playing the bagpipes. The closest we can get to that here is when Sarah Palin walks through a carefully rehearsed *Saturday Night Live* sketch to try to show that she's in on the joke. Which she isn't.** It's difficult for us to understand, you know. Jon Stewart interviews Tony Blair and doesn't lay a finger on him. And I think, "That's satire?" It isn't, though. Obviously, it's a chat show, and there are some other bits with it. But again, for us that's very peculiar.

**Jon Stewart is probably the closest thing America has to you, this smart-funny-attack-dog figure, but his targets are usually conservatives—and the people he's really dug into, face to face, have mostly been conservative media figures, like Tucker Carlson and Bill O'Reilly, for example. *Private Eye* and *Have I Got News For You* have always seemed more equal opportunity when it comes to criticizing people.** Well, we had three terms of New Labour, with the Iraq War in the middle, so we were under no illusion that the right has a monopoly on "vice, folly, and humbug"—that's the great 18th-century definition of what politicians get up to.

People say, "They have *The Daily Show* in America, why doesn't someone do that here?" I think, this is very good and it's often very funny, but it wouldn't work here. Because, well, we don't do it like that. We do it in a different way. I think

**Jon Stewart interviews Tony Blair and doesn't lay a finger on him. And I think, 'That's satire?'**

it's a mistake to imagine that people always do things in the same way.

**Piers Morgan's success in our respective countries has certainly happened in a different way. In Britain, he's known as a tabloid editor who was fired in disgrace and recently cited by the Leveson Report as giving an "utterly unpersuasive" denial of his involvement in phone hacking. Here, he helms one of CNN's flagship shows. Whose fault is he?** Oh, entirely yours. But I mean, again, he's cottoned on to a very good cause—saying what appears to be blindingly obvious in a society that doesn't want to recognize it. You know, it's quite a good shtick, really. It's difficult to criticize. And you can imagine how hard it is for me to say that!

[Hislop and Morgan are not friends. Hislop takes every opportunity to tear into him in the *Eye*, which refers to him as "Piers Moron," and they exchanged heated words when Morgan appeared on *Have I Got News For You* in 1996. A few years later, Morgan ordered his reporters to dig up dirt on Hislop and offered readers money for any scandalous photographs of the "moon-faced midget." They didn't find anything.]

**Who in America would make a good target for your kind of satire and commentary?** The trouble is that because *Private Eye* is quite parochial and I am, too, I don't really know enough about the States. I remember when I used to work on a program called *Spitting Image*, which NBC very briefly



**Vice, folly, and humbug** For more than 50 years, *Private Eye* has been making the Brits laugh and cry.

in the '80s bought a version of. [American audiences would know *Spitting Image* best as the puppets in Genesis's "Land of Confusion" video.] For the NBC pilot, we sent a script in, and we got a call from someone who was vice president or one of those things at the network, and he said, "Are you guys suggesting the President of the United States is an asshole?!?" And we had to say, "Yeah! Yeah!" That was sort of the gist of the script. Which didn't go down very well.

Essentially, they should've got American writers to write it. People say, "Why don't you do *Private Eye* in America?" And I say, "They should do it." Because they know who's lobbying; they know who the idiots are; they know the people who are sort of against gay marriage and have a string of rent boys. These are the stories that you know when you're there. And we don't know.

I remember meeting Harry Shearer probably 10 years before he was on *Have I Got News For You* [in 2012]. He's incredibly funny and he seems to know what's going on, so someone like him could do it. But he's not a national figure, is he?

**He's probably best known here for doing voices on *The Simpsons*.** I suppose that's how you do irreverence in America, through animation. It's on *Family Guy* and *South Park* and all of which are, to a British audience, pretty outrageous in terms of what they can get away with saying. I can't imagine human beings would be allowed to say any of those things.

**Our libel laws are a bit more relaxed than yours. [Hislop is known as "the most-sued man in British legal history."]** But I remember the Michael Jackson/Blanket episode [*South Park*'s "The Jeffersons"]. I can't imagine, you know, had you had humans doing that instead of, it would've been allowed to go out.

**Any American journalists/comedians/satirical anything you admire?** I remember reading *Spy* when it came out and thinking that was very exciting.

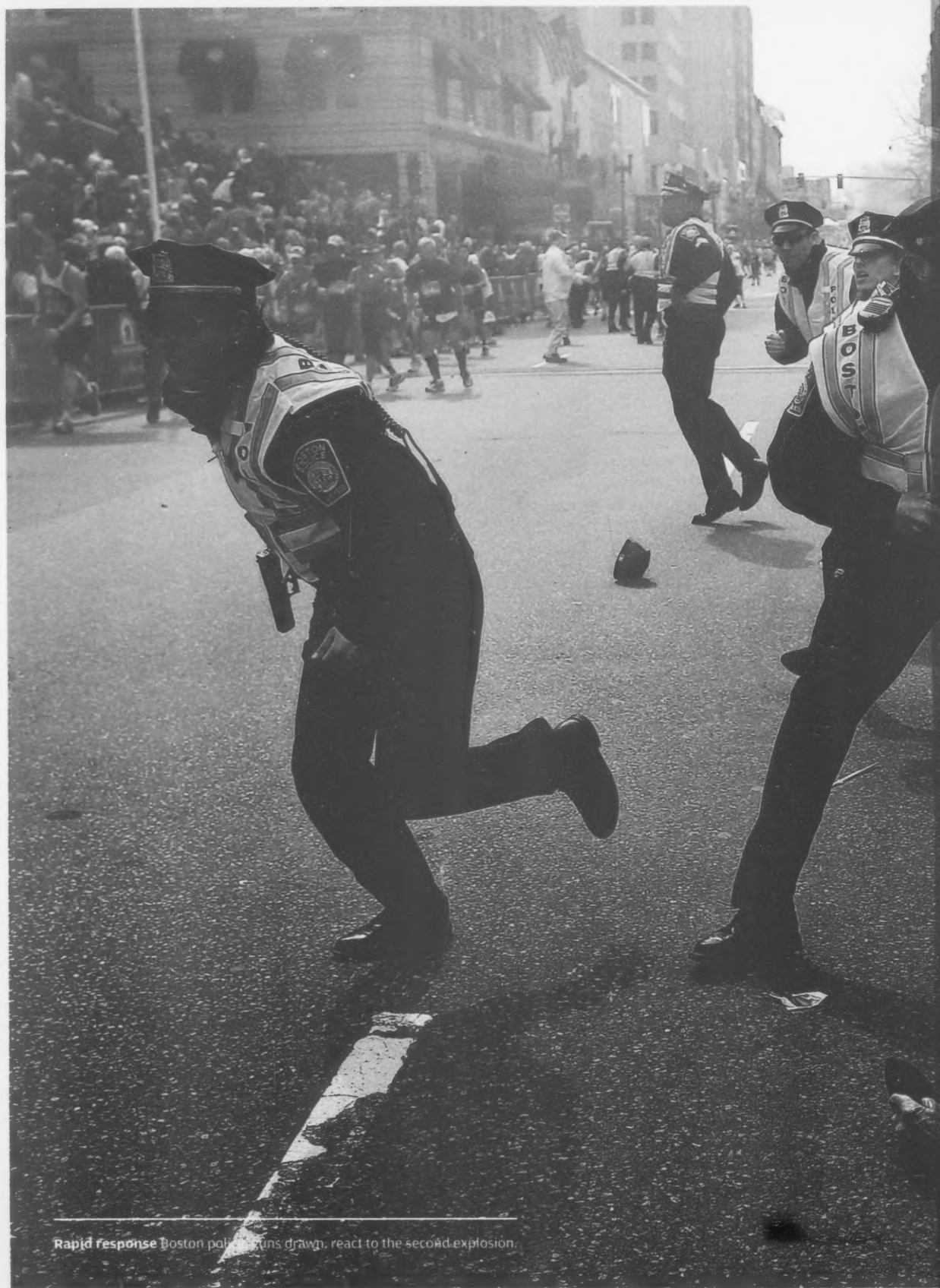
**I think *Spy* was the closest thing we've had to *Private Eye*.** Yeah, when Graydon [Carter and Kurt Anderson] launched that, it all seemed very funny and sharp and rude and all those things. So I don't know whether there's an appetite for it. I mean, the only thing that comes over here in any consistent way is people saying Jon Stewart's brilliant.



**'Moon-faced midget'** Hislop says Americans don't understand irreverence.

And that's taken as standard. It's like people saying "*The West Wing*'s brilliant, it's the best political program that's ever been made." And I'm just thinking, this is a liberal fantasy about what a president might be like. I prefer my politics ruder. The British wouldn't make *West Wing*. That's not how we think politics works. We genuinely don't buy into that. So I think it's partly expectation.

**Are Americans just too polite? Or maybe we just pretend to be too polite?** Maybe you're polite; maybe you're just nicer. It's perfectly possible! You're certainly much more positive; you're prepared to see more good. **CJR**



**Rapid response** Boston police officers react to the second explosion.



ON THE JOB

## Strong finish

SHORTLY BEFORE 3PM ON APRIL 15, *BOSTON Globe* reporter Michael Rezendes was in the home stretch of his seventh Boston Marathon when, suddenly, there were cops blocking the route. He didn't hear the two bombs that had exploded up at the finish line, killing three people and injuring more than 250. So he detoured to a nearby street to keep running, wanting to complete the race. When police again stopped him, "I was able to figure out that something must be grievously wrong," he said.

Rezendes leapt into reporter mode, asking the nearest officer what had happened. Then he tried to borrow a cellphone to call the newsroom. But the networks were overloaded by then, so he found a bar where he could use a landline.

"I called the *Globe*, and our famously gruff city editor, Mike Bello, said to me, 'Find somebody who saw something.'" The finish line was cordoned off, so Rezendes, a longtime investigative reporter, returned to where vans shuttled members of his running group between the race and their clubhouse. "When I got there, there was a woman I know who was a wife of a guy that was running the marathon, and she told me she had seen the second bomb go off with her 6-year-old and 7-year-old," he said. Rezendes eventually made his way back to the newsroom, along with a well-worn fleece from a stranger in the street who thought he looked cold. "That was just sort of a typical act of Boston Marathon generosity," Rezendes said. "I sat here in my running shorts at my desk, and the guy's grungy jacket and my sweaty Red Sox hat that I always wear running the marathon."

He filed his copy, showered at the office, and was finally driving to eat when the newsroom called: Police were searching a home in Revere with bomb-sniffing dogs. Rezendes headed to the scene, waiting there until about 10:30pm. Then, uncomfortably cold, he left for spaghetti and beer. It was the first time all day his endurance waned.

"I just never felt the slightest fatigue or exhaustion," said Rezendes, who put a large investigation on hold to continue reporting on the bombings' aftermath. "I've been telling myself it just means I wasn't running hard enough."

—Kira Goldenberg

JOHN TLUMACKI / BOSTON GLOBE VIA GETTY IMAGES



# Unconventional wisdom

John Summers was wrong for most magazines;  
that made him perfect for *The Baffler*

BY JUSTIN PETERS

In May 2012, one month after the release of the first issue of his tenure as editor of *The Baffler*, John Summers sat in a bar in Cambridge, MA, and counted off all the ways he was unfit for the job. "I don't have a cell phone or a Facebook account. I've never sent a text message. I don't use Twitter," he said. "I'm not a journalist. I'm not an academic. I'm not a professional writer. I'm not a professional editor. What I am is otherwise unemployed. Superfluous. That's what I am."

It's a résumé that would disqualify Summers from working at most magazines. But most magazines aren't *The Baffler*, which could be described as the country's foremost journal of superfluous opinion. Throughout its 25-year history, *The Baffler* has trafficked in the sorts of unprofitable ideas that directly challenge prevailing free-market, technocratic ideologies, ideas that might sound naïve or irrelevant to America's decision-makers and thought leaders. While many in the media swoon over silicon promises and the inexorable march of organizational progress, *The Baffler* delights in articulating all the ways in which modern life is bad, and getting worse.

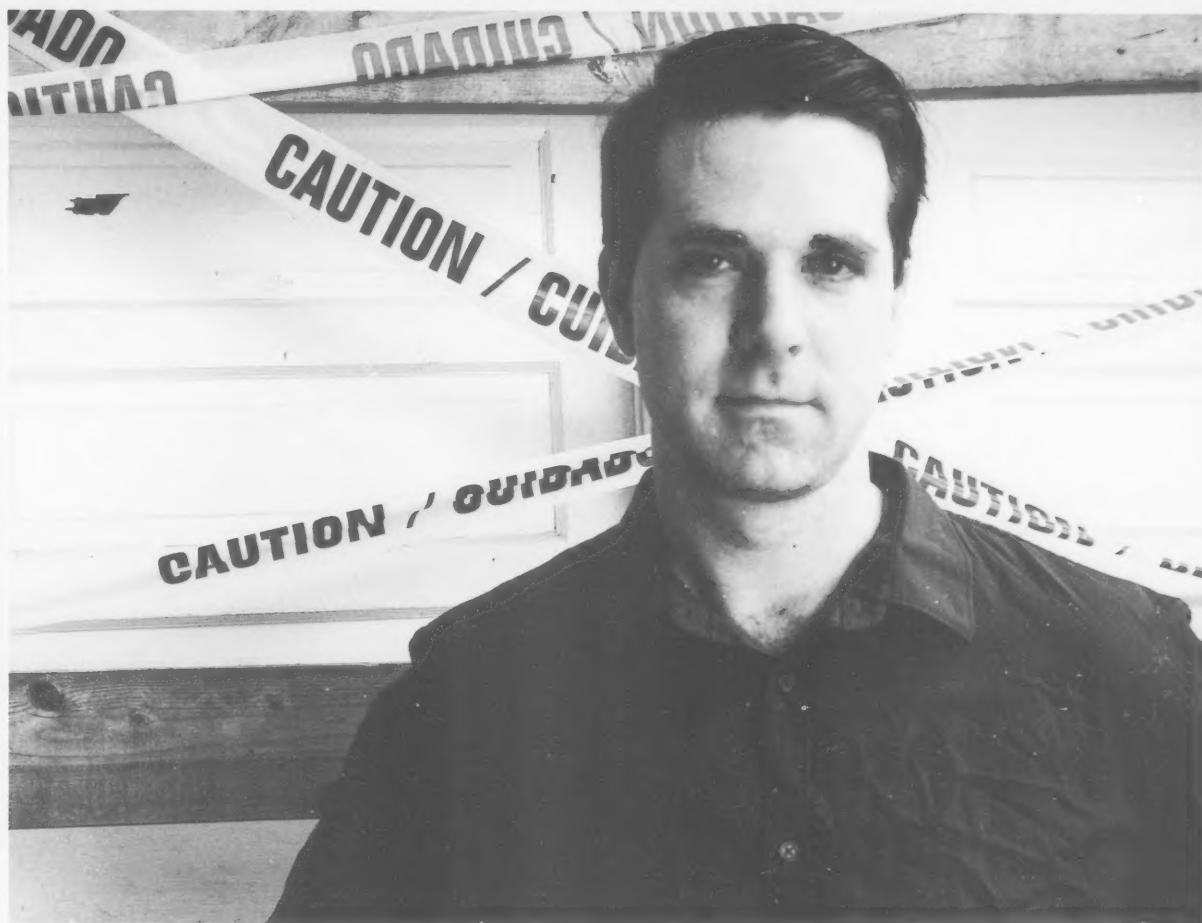
Founded by Keith White and Thomas Frank in 1988, *The Baffler* published 18 little-read, well-loved issues in 22 years before sputtering out in 2010, apparently for good. But it relaunched in May 2011 in the midst of a worldwide recession, Washington gridlock, and a bubbling current of political disaffection that birthed the Tea Party and Occupy movements. The new editor, Summers, was an independent historian who, at the time, was perhaps best known for a bridge-burning essay castigating his students at Harvard as incurious careerists who think they are owed special treatment and good fortune. "I never even wrote for [*The Baffler*]," Summers says. "I did write one piece, but it was killed."

Despite his inexperience—or perhaps because of it—Summers has made his mark. He has professionalized *The Baffler* and its operations in new ways. He has put the journal on a regular production schedule, expanded its staff, and

proved a surprisingly diligent fundraiser. He has made *The Baffler*—which features fiction, poetry, and striking graphics along with its articles—more beautiful, more timely, and more relevant than ever.

And he has done all this while maintaining *The Baffler's* reputation as a magazine of ideas that actually merits the term. "We want the most destructive possible criticism with the highest possible literary standards," Summers said last year, and he has delivered four perfervid issues taking on such generally revered subjects as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, *This American Life*, the Pew Charitable Trusts, tech-publisher Tim O'Reilly, Kickstarter, Harvard University, the MIT Media Lab, and *The Atlantic*, which writer Maureen Tkacik described as "a turgid mouthpiece for the plutocracy, a repository of shallow, lazy spin, and regular host of discussion forums during which nothing is discussed. It is, in every formal trait, a CIA front."

You don't have to agree with these opinions to admire the fearlessness and vehemence with which they are expressed. Over the course of their tenure, Summers and company have made a point of systematically dissecting those institutions and thinkers deemed important by the American managerial class, regardless of what this might mean for future keynote invitations, networking opportunities, and job prospects. "The consensus has all been wrong. The country is dying at the top," says Summers, citing an argument advanced by his longtime friend and current colleague Chris Lehmann. "There's never been a better time to be outside the consensus."



**Critical thinker** John Summers, editor of *The Baffler*, has never been afraid to speak his mind.

SUMMERS, 42, IS TALL AND SOFT-SPOKEN, WITH A SHARP MIND and a solemn academic countenance. He comes across as an extraordinarily sincere person: angry but never cynical, disdainful but never sarcastic. Occasionally, his sentences require footnotes. He will laugh at himself, at the circumstances that brought him here, and at the happy thought that somebody might become very annoyed by something he published. But about his ideas he is quite serious. He carries himself with the quiet intensity of a man who, now that he knows people are listening to him, wants to make sure he has something to say.

Summers would have made a great professor, if academia would have had him. He earned a PhD in intellectual history from the University of Rochester in 2006, writing his dissertation on C. Wright Mills, the sociologist best known for his book *The Power Elite*, a taxonomy and critique of the “overlapping cliques” that ruled American life. Both before and after he got his degree, Summers spent years as a poorly paid adjunct instructor and visiting scholar at various prominent universities, teaching classes, writing

essays, swallowing the unpalatable in hopes that it would lead to a tenure-track position. It did not. “At a certain point, I said, ‘Fuck it, I’m not getting a job anyway, so why should I suppress myself?’”

In 2008, after a multi-year stint as a tutor and then lecturer at Harvard, Summers wrote a kiss-off essay for the *Times Literary Supplement* criticizing his former students at Harvard as entitled plutocrats-in-waiting:

Most of the students I encountered had already embraced the perspectives of the rich, the powerful and the unalienated, and they seemed to have done so with appalling ease. In keeping with the tradition of the American rich they worked exceptionally long hours, they were aggressive in exercising their talents, and on the ideological features of market capitalism they were unanimous. Their written work disclosed the core components of the consensus upheld by their liberal parents: the meaning of liberty lies in the personal choice of consumers; free competition in goods and morals regulates value; technological progress is an unmixed good; war is unfortunate.

*The Baffler* was founded to challenge that same placid white-collar consensus, and so it is unsurprising that the magazine and Summers would enter the same orbit. While studying at Rochester, Summers made the acquaintance of Chris Lehmann, a journalist and Rochester alumnus who was well-connected in the small-magazine world. "I wrote something for him once," he says. "It was about civility. I was against it." In 2011, when Thomas Frank was looking for someone to take over *The Baffler*, Lehmann suggested Summers, who had been planning to found a literary magazine of his own. Though he had little editorial experience and less money, it didn't take him long to sign on. "If we do this, are we likely to think we've wasted our time?" Summers remembers thinking. "Probably not. Even if we haven't changed the world."

Though *The Baffler* originated in Chicago, it is now edited and published in Cambridge, MA, where Summers lives with his wife and two children in an apartment in the Inman Square neighborhood; their second child was born when his first issue was in production. His wife, Anna Summers, is well known for her work translating Russian-language short stories into English. She now serves as the magazine's literary editor.

But the magazine is a family affair in more ways than one. "I got chewed out in New York by a former *Baffler* contributor who accused me of being un-*Baffler*," he remembered. He is very aware that he has assumed control of a cult magazine. "What happens is you put your ass on the line. My ass is on the firing line," said Summers last year, when the success of the venture was by no means assured. "But I can take it, I think. What else is there to do during a great depression?"

SUMMERS USES THE WORD "INTERSTITIAL" TO DESCRIBE where he fits into American intellectual life. "The interstitial life—the life lived in between institutions—is what many of us have been living," he said in an email. "It does not mean we come from nowhere (that's the conceit of the overclass, as if their perspective is the only one) but rather that we are partially known in lots of different places."

He has populated the magazine with other interstitial thinkers, intellectual drifters dismissed by the academy for being too snarky, too strident, or too sincere. There's Thomas Frank, of course, who remains on the magazine's masthead as "Founding Editor" and regularly contributes articles and substantive input. There's Lehmann, now the journal's senior editor and an invaluable collaborator for Summers. ("Chris is a veteran editor, and I'm just playing," Summers said.) There's the radical anthropologist David Graeber; authors Susan Faludi and Rick Perlstein. Though many of the contributors have high public profiles, they are unaffiliated with academic organizations. They have found in *The Baffler's* pages a home for ideas they can't express elsewhere. Many of these ideas are gloomy ones.

Last year, Summers recalled: "I was in Brooklyn and somebody says, 'When I think of *The Baffler*, I think of hope.' I started laughing. 'Hope? You mean Issue 5, Dark Days Ahead?' I told Tom [Frank], and he started laughing. 'Hope? Go to church.'"

*The Baffler* would argue that this hopelessness stems from the failure of our major idea-generating institutions—academia and the media—to actually generate ideas. To Summers and his contributors, media and the universities have abdicated their responsibility to challenge prevailing wisdom and encourage unprofitable thought. The most popular media outlets pander to middle-class prejudices and pieties.

---

## Summers has populated the magazine with a group of interstitial thinkers and intellectual drifters.

The most prominent universities sell bankrupt dreams to strivers. "You've got whole sections of the country that are over the cliff for risk," Summers says. "Then you have cultural institutions that don't want to make any fucking mistakes."

*The Baffler* reserves a special scorn for academia and the corporatization thereof. The first issue of Summers's tenure, which was published by MIT Press, spent 100 pages directly attacking the enthusiastic techno-utopianism that is MIT's specialty, with particular venom directed at the "trivial, redundant, usually disappointing and often downright annoying output" of the MIT Media Lab.

One of the best pieces from the recent run, in Issue 20, was "Adam Wheeler Went to Harvard," by the former Gawker writer Jim Newell. Wheeler became briefly notorious a couple of years ago after Harvard discovered that he had fabricated his application—and much else—during the course of his undergraduate career; he was caught after submitting a Rhodes Scholarship application filled with almost entirely fictional accomplishments. Wheeler was expelled, prosecuted for college-credential fraud, and sentenced to probation; one of the conditions was that he was not allowed to say that he went to Harvard. But Wheeler *did* go to Harvard, wrote Newell, and his only crime "was that he saw Harvard degrees for what they are—items for purchase that cloak the owner with a manufactured prestige that, in our pretend meritocracy, automatically raises one's market value upon the deal's closing."

As for the media, *The Baffler* snipes at easy targets—Politico, CNBC—but also takes shots at outlets that are less frequently criticized. The issue with the Wheeler piece also included Eugenia Williamson's stinging takedown of *This American Life*, the beloved public radio program that, she wrote, specializes in "twee, transporting narratives" about harmless middle-class ambition. The article ran in the aftermath of a scandal in which monologist Mike Daisey was revealed to have fabricated details of a *This American Life* story about his trip to Apple's factories in China. In

Williamson's telling, Daisey, like Adam Wheeler, was merely guilty of telling his superiors what they wanted to hear: in this case, "a dramatic nonfiction narrative in the form of a personal journey" that satisfied "the show's habit of massaging painful realities into puddles of personal experience, its preference for pathos over tragedy."

Williamson further explored this theme in a devastating section about a writer named Pete Jordan, or "Dishwasher Pete," who spent a year roaming the country taking dishwasher jobs in various restaurants and recounting his adventures on *TAL* in a series of wry, first-person segments extolling the joys of sudsy menial labor:

Never mind that Jordan was a writer slumming it to get material. Never mind that only a child of privilege can afford to think of a menial job as an heroic enterprise, or to make up stupid, pseudo-poetic phrases to describe it, like "pearl diving" and "suds busting." Never mind, either, that dishwashers are unskilled laborers, not members of a subculture, and that most of them who aren't Dishwasher Pete would rather be doing something else. To *This American Life* fans, everyone is measured by middle-class terms—even people left scraping dirty plates for minimum wage in a hot kitchen.

If these excerpts sound overly critical, well, that's the point. The magazine is very much a journal of criticism, under the assumption that rigorous social criticism is a necessary condition for substantive social change. Before assuming control of *The Baffler*, Summers edited books of essays by C. Wright Mills and Dwight Macdonald. Mills turned his critical faculties on the body politic, Macdonald on contemporary culture; both detested organizational mediocrity. There are few contemporary analogs to Mills and Macdonald, a fact that frustrates Summers but doesn't surprise him. "Society has decided we don't need critics, don't need social criticism, that criticism is superfluous," he says. No matter: *The Baffler* has never shied away from superfluity. So while other magazines of ideas sell societal solutions to "thought leaders," *The Baffler* is content to be a "thought destroyer," as Chris Lehmann said at a *Baffler* event last year. The journal's tagline phrases the same sentiment in slightly different fashion: "*The Baffler*: the journal that blunts the cutting edge."

AT THE END OF 2012, ABOUT 100 PEOPLE GATHERED AT THE Housing Works Book Store in lower Manhattan to celebrate the launch of *The Baffler*'s third new issue while simultaneously mocking Ayn Rand, the long-dead polemicist and novelist who argued, at great length, that greed was a virtue. Rather than organize a reading or a panel discussion, Summers and company were hosting something they called the Ayn Rand Game Show. Wearing a severe suit with a gigantic dollar sign on her lapel, an Ayn Rand impersonator led two contestants—Thomas Frank and comedian Julie Klausner—through a series of questions about books: "Rand" would describe classic works of literature, and the contestants had to guess the title. (Rand: "I actually love this book and I wish it were a memoir." Frank: "Is it *Lord of the Flies*?")

Later, the Rand impersonator led Frank and Klausner

through a rousing round of "Fuck, Marry, Do Not Resuscitate," in which she named three fictional characters, and the contestants had to guess which character fell into which category. "John Galt, Tiny Tim, Scrooge McDuck," Rand said. Frank hesitated before giving his answer: "Marry Scrooge, fuck John Galt, and Tiny Tim must die." The crowd roared. Afterward, they lined up to buy copies of the latest issue.

People are paying attention to *The Baffler*. Events across the country have drawn similar crowds; an "impact statement" prepared by the magazine compiles pages worth of acclaim the magazine has received from national and international media outlets. And as the magazine has become more prominent, Summers has had to become something he thought he'd never be: a businessman.

"I didn't grow up wanting to be a writer or an editor or any of those things," he says. "Least of all a manager. I hate managers. The whole magazine hates managers." Nevertheless, he is now managing six full-time employees, and actively looking for funds to hire more.

Basic funding for *The Baffler* now comes from a deal Summers struck in 2011 with MIT Press: The publisher would give Summers \$33,000 per issue over the course of the next five years. While that's more than the magazine historically had to work with, it's not enough to fund everything that Summers wants to do. He talks about raising several million dollars to found a research institute—"like the conservatives have"—that would employ writers like Frank, Lehmann, and Graeber and give them license to explore their interests without having to hustle for book contracts and freelance assignments. "[We'd be] making the free-market dogma seem as ridiculous as it is," he says.

So he has been forced to fundraise, to seek out the sorts of rich donors who might be willing to fund an anti-free-market organization. "We estimate there might be 200 to 500 of them," Summers said last fall. "But you can't just send them a letter." At first, it was rough going. "One woman, we'd have very pleasant conversations," he said. "At the end, there was nothing. And I realized: I paid for lunch. Every time. I lost money." With some coaching, Summers has gradually learned how to approach these people and solicit donations.

There are other new responsibilities, too: meetings with publishers, speaking engagements. After a life spent primarily on the intellectual outskirts, he seems pleased and occasionally surprised to find himself in a position of relative prominence. "The company I keep is a hell of a lot better than when I was an adjunct teacher," he says.

Summers now travels from Boston to New York a couple times a month to meet with potential funders and donors. During a recent breakfast, he spoke of plans to put all the magazine's archived content online, for free, in order to expand the audience and attract new readers. Despite his protestations to the contrary, he looked, for all the world, like a magazine editor. "This is the transformation," he said, smiling as he reached for the check. "Now I have an iPhone, I have a second tie, and I can pay for breakfast." **CJR**

JUSTIN PETERS is *CJR*'s editor at large.



# Distance yearning

Done right, online courses could help democratize our newsrooms

BY LORI HENSON

In March 2012, I stood with three journalism students in Times Square, taking in the lights, color, and scope of humanity. We had flown in from Indiana for the College Media Advisers annual conference, and the trip to New York City was a new experience for all of us. Two of the students from the private, Catholic, women's college in Indiana where I was teaching were traditional, on-campus students, approaching or just past their 20th birthdays.

The third student, Stephanie, was a year older than I, both of us in our late 30s. She was an online student, and until that weekend all our communication had been through email, discussion boards, Facebook, and the occasional phone call. She took a couple of classes at a time while working full-time as a massage therapist in Indianapolis—one of the 6.7 million students taking an online class, many of whom would have a hard time getting a degree without this option.

Online enrollment across all academic programs has steadily increased for the past decade, according to a recent study by the Babson Survey Research Group. Journalism programs began to embrace distance courses relatively recently. The University of Texas is the latest university to expand its massive open online courses, or MOOCs, to include media-related classes. But few journalism programs at established universities offer a fully online degree.

Stephanie, bright and unmarried, was surprised but thrilled to be invited on the New York trip. She says she had never considered a career in journalism until, at her graduation from a massage-therapy program, an instructor read aloud an essay Stephanie had written. She says she overheard someone in the audience say, "Stephanie should be a writer."

But like many nontraditional students, Stephanie initially lacked confidence. She was especially self-conscious and shy about conducting interviews. She struggled to step outside her familiar social circles to find sources for her stories. Without face-to-face contact, I had little way of knowing

whether her sources were close friends or relatives. I had shy students on campus, too, but with them I was able to give in-person pep talks and, in one case, even write a script for a telephone interview and sit beside the student as she conducted the interview to help her overcome her fears.

In the lights of Times Square, I saw Stephanie push through the crowds and embrace her adventure. Her biggest challenge that weekend, she told me, was a conference workshop that required her to approach strangers for man-on-the-street interviews. But she conquered her fear, and between sessions went on her own to shops and landmarks she had only seen on TV, hailed cabs, and rode the subway.

Getting to witness Stephanie's coming-out party was a luxury for me. I had taught a combination of traditional and distance courses for two years at that point. I loved working with students like Stephanie, who balanced school with some combination of a career, children, spouses, aging parents, and countless other real-world stressors.

During graduate school at Indiana University, I had grown accustomed to teaching upper-middle-class students, full of confidence and often a sense of entitlement, some of whom even had ties to New York magazines or other media legacies. My Big Ten students were sought out for opportunities.

My distance students, on the other hand, had to make their own way. Recruiters did not seek them out, but they had so much to offer. The stories they wrote addressed financial problems and economic trends that often never occurred to my traditional students. One wrote about battered women and the many legal frustrations they face in seeking help, not from an outsider's perspective, but as someone who had worked with battered women. A working mom reported on issues of transracial adoption, based on the experiences of neighbors who had adopted. And while most journalism students report on community events, meetings, and social issues in their coursework, few cover school board meetings from the perspective of a parent, or



bring the experience of being a tax-paying homeowner to a city council meeting.

This was the journalistic diversity that brought me to academia. I wanted to be part of making journalism more accommodating and accessible for those who think they don't belong in The Media. These online courses, though far from perfect, have the potential to help democratize newsrooms and news content.

While a lot of attention rightly has been paid to diversifying newsrooms along race, ethnic, and gender lines, there is less discussion of class hierarchies. Scholars have been writing for more than 25 years about the professionalization of journalism and the problems that creates for inclusive coverage of working-class communities. At first, the Internet was seen as the solution for getting non-elite voices into media. But legacy media websites still dominate online news content, and without a reliable way to monetize online news, it's not yet conceivable that someone like Stephanie could start her own site and earn a living that way.

According to a study by the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, women made up nearly 62 percent of journalism students in 2011. But research by David Weaver and his colleagues at Indiana University, who have studied journalists for more than three decades, finds that women's newsroom careers tend to be shorter than their male counterparts because of the strain a journalism job puts on family life. This is especially true for journalists whose working-class families have fewer resources for childcare and eldercare.

Online journalism education is one way to bring working-class experiences and perspectives into elite media.

Still, I missed sharing in my students' adventures. One of the steep downsides of online education is that it can rob an instructor—and the student—of the most fun and rewarding aspects of teaching: the energy of the performance in the classroom, the impromptu conversations between classes, and the moments of spontaneity that enrich the educational experience and create memories every semester. In fact, faculty backlash against online education appears to be building, as instructors cite the long hours and constant challenge to interact with online students that are inherent in the format.

Online instructors must be open to answering questions day and night. Feedback on assignments that would take 10 seconds to speak takes 10 minutes to write. The flexibility that is so appealing to workers, parents, and all the others drawn to distance education is the teacher's burden. There are no limits to the instructional day.

The rigidity and necessary standardization of online courses means that I rarely get to take advantage of breaking news and of-the-moment topics that energize a classroom experience. During the Boston Marathon bombing coverage in April, I brought up on the classroom screen NBC News's live online feed for my on-campus reporting students, and we discussed the tactics and themes in the coverage. I haven't found a way to do something similar in an online context, in which assignments, quizzes, and discussions are often prepared and static from the first day of the course.

And yet I know that online journalism courses have

---

## **My Big Ten students were sought out for opportunities; my distance students had to make their own way.**

brought students into the field who would have had a very difficult time in a traditional classroom. In the couple of years I taught distance journalism courses, my students included a paralyzed man for whom online journalism classes—and an online writing career—were his only practical ways to have a career in journalism.

Another student was an Iraq War veteran whose post-traumatic stress disorder made online courses his best option. His stories dealt with veterans' struggles to get health services through the Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as with homelessness and suicide—issues that, unfortunately, are part of the reality for many veterans. After a number of setbacks and a great deal of help from his family, the former soldier earned his bachelor's degree and now covers sports and community events for a weekly newspaper in the Northwest. He is working on a book about his military service.

Making journalism courses more available to more kinds of people seems an important way to produce critical thinkers and leaders at all levels of society. Online education's ability to reach nontraditional students in both rural and urban areas has been part of the utopian promise of the medium from its beginning.

My experience developing and teaching online courses was one of the reasons I got my current job, teaching journalism at Indiana State University. The online courses are expanding here, and I have already been asked to look into developing an online media-law course.

But navigating the years ahead should include frank discussions about how to give online students the flexibility and the access without sacrificing the relationships, the spontaneity, the adventures. Journalism programs, in addition to creating online courses, could do more community outreach to demystify the field for those who feel disconnected from The Media. Conventional programs should attempt to include online students in campus events and involve them in student media. Enrichment experiences, such as conferences and workshops, should include online students.

Stephanie's weekend in New York was the first of many new experiences journalism has brought her. She has contributed stories to small newspapers in the Indianapolis region while working her way through school. This fall, she will begin her senior year in the online journalism program at St. Mary-of-the-Woods. We need more students like her. **CJR**

---

LORI HENSON, PhD, is a journalism lecturer at Indiana State University. She previously taught campus and online courses at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College.

## Open wide

Critics and boosters alike agree that the full implementation of Obamacare will be complicated and nerve-wracking for some people. Here's how journalists can help.

BY TRUDY LIEBERMAN

*Much of healthcare journalism is about policy choices and the debates that shape them. The full implementation of Obamacare, however, calls for something different—old-fashioned consumer reporting. Many features of the Affordable Care Act are already in place, but now comes its central pillar: the requirement for most Americans to carry health insurance, starting January 1, or face tax penalties. Most people—insured through their employer or through Medicare or the military—won't see much change. Some with low incomes will be able to get benefits for the first time through*

*Medicaid, at least in the 26 states that have currently agreed to expand that program. But those who buy their own insurance—about 15 million Americans already and maybe another 9 million or so who may buy it for the first time—will need help.*

*These people can buy coverage via the new health insurance exchanges that are being set up in each state—some by the states themselves, some through state/federal partnerships, and some by the feds alone (in states where the legislature chose not to take part). How the exchanges will function is anyone's guess. So is the question of affordability. Some people will receive government subsidies to help them pay for coverage; others won't.*

*Critics and backers alike agree that implementing a vast and complex program that affects family budgets and family health will be fraught. Readers and viewers will be forever grateful if journalists help them find their way through the confusion of the liftoff. Here is a case study that illustrates some themes for journalists to consider, and a down payment on what they need to know. Look for more on CJR.org.*

### Carol's story

*One woman tries to navigate the insurance jungle*

A Pennsylvania woman we'll call Carol contacted me not long ago with a vexing problem. She is 59, "a self-employed individual buyer of Aetna health insurance," which "just raised my rates by \$100 per month," she wrote. Aetna told

her that her premium—for its HMO 30 plan, a managed-care policy with what the company calls "moderate" premiums—would increase 17 percent, from \$604 to \$704 a month. That's \$1,200 a year, bringing her annual insurance outlay to nearly \$8,500. These days, such increases are not uncommon in the individual insurance market.

Aetna's Dear Customer letter gave a rationale: higher medical costs plus Obamacare. "I live in Pennsylvania," Carol protested, "so I don't understand why Obamacare would cause my rates to go up, because our governor has not opted into Obamacare."

For starters, Carol had a misperception about the law, one that's often heard in states that have chosen not to operate their own healthcare exchange. The state may not be taking part, but the federal law still applies—whether the state, the federal government, or a joint partnership between the two operates the exchange. Carol has the option of continuing with her existing policy for another year or trying to do better by shopping in her exchange, which in Pennsylvania will be run by the feds, and for which she is eligible. See **Who's eligible**. She could also decline insurance and pay a tax penalty. See **The penalties**. She says she won't do that.

Meanwhile, Carol's premium is already going up. "I think they are gouging me," she said, and set out to find out why, though she didn't expect to find answers. "I feel powerless," she told me.

Many of the 15 million people who, like Carol, buy

insurance on their own, without the help of an employer making decisions about price and coverage, feel just as powerless. They will soon be joined by another 9 million or so who are currently uninsured and who will be turned loose in the uncharted insurance jungle starting October 1. Carol's story is emblematic of all those people looking for answers.

She began her quest with Aetna, where a customer-service rep advised she would have to write to the carrier's grievance-and-appeals department because it has no phone number. The Aetna rep also told her that the state of Pennsylvania had allowed the premium increases, so if she wanted to appeal, she should contact state insurance regulators in Harrisburg.

Instead, Carol called the office of Steve McCarter, her representative in the state House of Representatives. "They told me to fill out a complaint form and to check out the federal exchanges in October," she recalled. Her next stop: the office of Patrick Meehan, her congressional representative. There a staffer informed Carol that a complaint about high premiums was a legislative issue, and the office would call her back. By the end of May, nobody had called.

Carol feared a runaround and she got one. But Aetna's hefty premium increase is not simply a consumer's complaint. It is a big dollars-and-cents issue for thousands of families like hers that have seen their premiums climb into the stratosphere over the past decade—a problem unlikely to quickly disappear under Obamacare. A look at her current predicament may help illuminate the kinds of choices she and many others face in coming months.

Carol had chosen her HMO 30 policy because it appeared to be the cheaper option at the time. It covers her and two adult children in their early 20s, who stayed on her policy after college, thanks to an Obamacare provision that lets young adults remain on their parents' plan until age 26. (Her husband, 59, a former railroad worker, is disabled because of a job-related injury. He gets a pension from the Railroad Retirement Board and health coverage from Medicare.) Carol earns about \$20,000 a year as a freelance proofreader. Before premiums got so expensive, she had coverage from what is called a preferred provider organization, a PPO. "I loved it," she said.

Who wouldn't? She could go to any doctor, and the out-of-pocket costs and the premiums were reasonable. The PPO got too expensive, so she chose a new plan called the HMO 15, a managed-care policy with restrictions on which health-care providers she could use, but with reasonable copays. Premium increases continued to pile up, however, and she switched again—to the HMO 30 plan, with slightly lower premiums but much higher copays and more cost-sharing. She didn't shop for insurance from other companies. "It was so hard to compare plans," she said. "I just gave up."

Comparing plans is very hard—even for people like me who are supposed to understand them. Comparing even a few of the benefits—all the while not knowing which illnesses you or your family member may face in the next year—requires a person to calculate risks and make tradeoffs. That's a tough exercise that requires an understanding of

## Who's eligible?

Generally, people who do not have coverage otherwise—from an employer, Medicare, Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), or the military—can buy insurance in an exchange and get a subsidy to help pay the premium. Those who are eligible for coverage through other routes can also buy insurance through the exchanges, but are not eligible for subsidies.

Two other categories should be noted:

**If you think your employer coverage is inadequate** If that coverage meets certain government tests but the employee feels it is still not good enough, she can shop in the exchange, but is not eligible for a subsidy.

**If what you have to pay for employer coverage is out of your price range** Workers who pay more than 9.5 percent of their adjusted gross income for employer coverage can buy a policy in the exchange for themselves or their families—or both—and get a subsidy. (A problem arises, however, when a worker's contribution to an *individual* policy is less than 9.5 percent of income, but the contribution to a *family* policy is more than that. Family members in this situation are currently not eligible for subsidized coverage from the exchanges.)

*When families are not eligible for subsidized health insurance, where are they going for coverage?*

## The penalties

People who don't buy the required insurance can expect to pay tax penalties, as follows:

- **In 2014** \$95 per person, or no more than 1 percent of taxable income
- **In 2015** \$325 per person, or 2 percent of the taxable income
- **In 2016 and beyond** \$695 per person or 2.5 percent

Families with low incomes will generally pay the flat amount, while those with higher incomes will pay a percentage of their income in 2016.

There will be a maximum penalty, figured in this way: one full penalty per each adult in the family, and an additional half an adult penalty per child—but the total penalty cannot exceed \$2,085 if the penalty is a flat rate. If it is a percentage of income, it can't exceed the cost of a bronze plan, the cheapest type of policy in the exchanges.

*Will some people find it cheaper to take the penalty than buy insurance?*

### The jargon

**Deductible** the amount someone pays out-of-pocket before insurance begins to pay. This is usually lower for in-network providers than for those out of network.

**Copayment** a set amount paid for a particular medical service or drug. Historically they have been low, but in the last year or so they have been rising for certain services.

**Coinsurance** a percentage of a bill for a service that someone pays out of pocket.

*How do these elements vary from policy to policy?*

### The tradeoffs

**Risk versus coverage** Buying insurance means weighing risk against the price of protecting yourself from that risk. In health insurance, it means considering your health, trying to predict what sort of medical problems may surface, and figuring out how much you can afford to cover those risks. In general, the higher the premium, the more comprehensive the coverage. Policies with lower premiums tend to carry more financial risk if you get sick.

### Premiums versus coinsurance, copays, and deductibles

Low premiums may also mean high coinsurance, copays, and deductibles. People may choose low premiums and hope that they won't use many services during the year.

*Will shoppers in the exchanges flock to low-premium plans, leaving themselves exposed to risk if they get sick?*

### The essential benefits

Under Obamacare, all policies sold in the individual market must cover 10 essential benefits: doctor visits and outpatient services; emergency care; hospital care; maternity and newborn care; mental health and substance-abuse disorders; prescription drugs; rehabilitative services and devices; lab tests; preventive services and chronic-disease management; and pediatric care.

What services patients actually get among these 10 will vary from policy to policy. An insurer can comply with the law while limiting the number of visits for physical therapy, say, or for some other services. Or an insurer can require policyholders to pay more out-of-pocket for particular services, or vary the deductible.

However, Obamacare limits what people will pay out of pocket to \$6,250 this year for individuals and \$12,500 for families (including deductibles).

*How are insurers complying with the essential benefit standards while limiting services or varying the cost sharing?*

how insurers price their products, and what the fine print means—like the difference between coinsurance and copayments and how deductibles vary depending on where you receive care. See **The jargon**. Insurance companies tend to mix and match between various costs for various kinds of services, a little more for this, a little less for that, making apples-to-apples comparisons difficult.

For example, Carol's HMO 15 plan required a \$15 copay—a set amount for a service—for a CT scan or an MRI done as an outpatient, a \$15 copay for outpatient X-rays, and blood work, and a \$15 copay for urgent care. With her HMO 30, the premiums were slightly cheaper but the copayments shot way up—\$250 for CT scans and MRIs, \$50 for blood work and X-rays, and \$200 for a visit to an urgent-care center. And while her old plan required a \$15 copayment for the facility fee at an outpatient surgical-care center, the HMO 30 requires a \$550 copay, an amount Carol found challenging. "I was supposed to get an endoscopy," she told me. "I cancelled it." See **The tradeoffs**.

She did make an appointment for a gallbladder-function scan because the copayment was only \$50. "The average person does not understand why certain tests require a huge copay, and others don't," she said. Drug coverage was different, too. In short, health insurers are pushing consumers toward choices that may be best for the insurer's bottom line.

Carol's doubts about her Aetna coverage multiplied in March, when the company sent the letter about the premium increase. In essence, the company was telling her she could keep her HMO 30 plan, but that it might not have a lot of new benefits that policies sold after October 1 will have—benefits required by the Affordable Care Act—that she may not need. See **The essential benefits**. And that these new benefits come with a price that she may not want to pay.

Between the lines, it seems, Aetna was also revealing a strategy: Try to keep as many healthy policyholders on the books as long as possible. The message: *Stay with us instead of venturing into the unknown in the exchanges*. Carol and her children are reasonably healthy, and in terms of insurance company profits, the more healthy people on board the better. Still, she was flummoxed by the choice. "Do you want the devil you know or the devil you don't know?" as she put it.

Indeed, Aetna was asking her to make a choice without all the facts. The company's letter omitted a crucial factor: the possibility of an Obamacare subsidy, which would make coverage more affordable. She could only get that subsidy if she buys in the exchange. And, as it turns out, Carol is eligible for a subsidy, because her household income—her income plus her husband's from his pension—is below \$62,040, this year's eligibility cutoff for a household like her's. See **The subsidies**.

Until she begins shopping in the Pennsylvania exchange and chooses a policy, she won't know the exact amount of the subsidy she would get, or her remaining share of the premium. The exchange will automatically calculate the amount, based on her income and the policy she selects. But a family whose income is between 300 and 400 percent of the federal poverty level, where Carol and her husband



---

People like Carol have seen premiums climb into the stratosphere, a problem not likely to quickly disappear.

roughly fall, should get a subsidy that covers between 35 and 44 percent of the premium.

That kind of help might allow Carol to buy a better policy than Aetna's HMO 30, with more benefits and less cost-sharing. That might make it easier to have tests like the endoscopy she decided to forego. But making the calculation is not easy.

One thing health advocates fear: The choices in the exchanges might be too numerous. In Colorado alone, 17 health insurers have filed proposed rates for 813 different plans for individuals and small groups. Research has told us that when people have too many choices, they make no choice at all. Just choosing between two plans, as Carol did recently among Aetna products, was hard enough. "The plans had all kinds of variables and, as you know, with kids, you never know what will come up medically," she said. "So it's hard to predict what I would need. I did the best I could with the material Aetna sent me."

Now she must choose again. CJR will follow Carol this fall as she explores the Pennsylvania insurance exchange. Watch for it on [CJR.org](http://CJR.org), in The Second Opinion section of the United States Project, our politics and policy desk. We hope other media outlets will follow people like Carol. Case studies are a good way to help readers and viewers through what promises to be a confusing time. See **Getting help**.

No one really knows for sure whether this bold experiment to give more Americans health insurance through the private market will pan out. Much will depend on the price and coverage offered by policies sold in the exchanges, and whether enough young, healthy people will buy them.

Just because some people will be eligible for subsidies doesn't mean they will not have trouble fitting health insurance into a family budget. Coinsurance and copays and high deductibles will still be barriers to care for many, and these will continue to rise. And in any system that relies on the private market, some people will always be left out. The CBO estimates 31 million fall outside of Obamacare.

The biggest unknown of all is whether the law will really slow down the rise in healthcare costs. That's related to whether the Obamacare provisions will change the way Americans get care, as its supporters believe. That's the \$1-trillion question. **CJR**

---

TRUDY LIEBERMAN is a fellow at the Center for Advancing Health and a longtime contributing editor to the Columbia Journalism Review. She is the lead writer for *The Second Opinion*, CJR's healthcare desk, which is part of our United States Project on the coverage of politics and policy. Follow the project on Twitter @USProjectCJR.

---

## The subsidies

The lower a person's or family's income, the larger the subsidy.

A family of four with an income of \$35,325 (150 percent of the current federal poverty level), who bought a \$14,000 silver policy—one designed to cover 70 percent of someone's medical expenses—would get an estimated subsidy of 83 percent of the premium cost. The subsidy for a family with an income of \$47,100 (200 percent of the poverty level) would cover about 72 percent of the premium. The same size family with an income of \$70,650 (300 percent of the poverty level) would get a subsidy covering about 44 percent of the premium. Families with incomes greater than \$94,200 get no government help.

The exact amount of the subsidy will, of course, depend on the policy someone chooses and the family size. It will be calculated automatically at the time of enrollment in the state exchange.

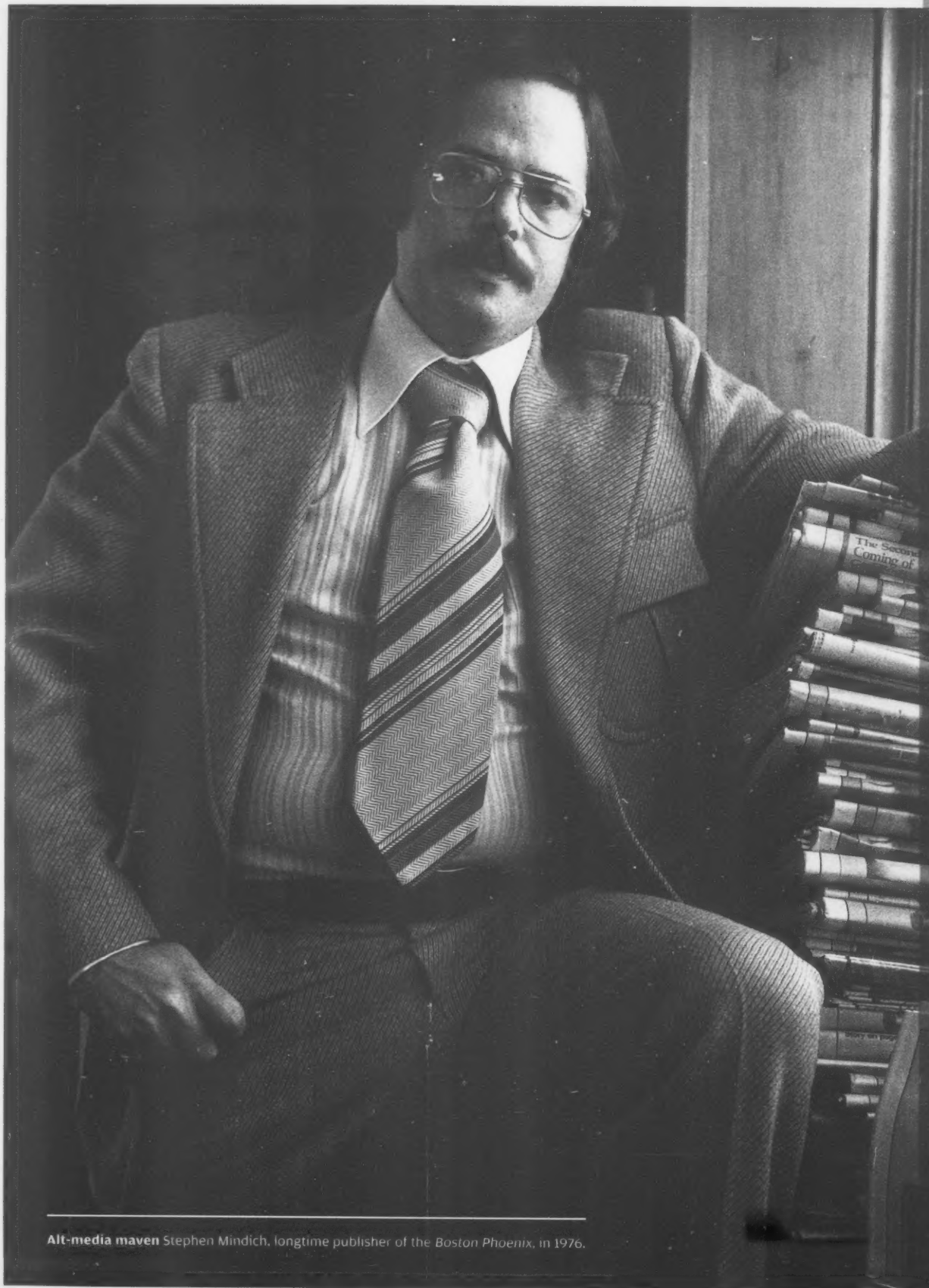
*Will subsidies be adequate to buy coverage with low cost-sharing for people whose incomes are in the middle range?*

---

## Getting help

Where will consumers get help finding their way through the exchange jungle? The law provides for a system of "navigators" to help people sign up for coverage in the exchange, and also steer them to state Medicaid programs if they are eligible. Meanwhile, the Department of Health and Human Services set up another system, with "assisters" who will also give guidance. The assisters will be active later this year, during the initial open-enrollment period. (But note: Assisters will not be available in the 16 states where the federal government will exclusively run the exchange.) Another layer of helpers, called "certified application counselors," will be available in some areas. They can work out of community health centers, hospitals, and consumer organizations.

*How good is the counseling?*



**Alt-media maven** Stephen Mindich, longtime publisher of the *Boston Phoenix*, in 1976.

# Ideas + Reviews

SECOND READ

## Clarion call

The future of the alternative press is evident in its past

BY CHRIS FARAONE

I spent the morning of March 14, 2013, working my staff job for the *Boston Phoenix*, interviewing pushcart vendors in Downtown Crossing, the somewhat bleak, half-mile-long shopping concourse in the neck of the Hub. Days earlier, the vendors had been told by the private Business Improvement District that their licenses would expire forever in two months. Some proprietors had hustled there for decades, selling everything from earmuffs to sausages through cold winters and recessions. But when a host of corporations in the nearby skyscrapers pumped the BID full of big bucks, it was decided that all carts had to go.

Since Filene's department store was shuttered seven years ago, Downtown Crossing has lacked the draw of a flagship merchant. On the depressing edge of the crater where that Boston landmark once stood, street vendors have since accounted for some of the only commerce. But now that H&M and other multinational retailers had moved in, the BID was discarding these merchants like rubbish. It was ripe for the *Phoenix*, which specialized in covering vulnerable underdogs who got clobbered by greedy, plutocratic interests. During my years on staff there, I had covered countless once-vital Boston institutions that were disappearing with little public attention or notice—from dive bars to the graffiti scene to the imminent extinction of the silversmith trade.

I realize the irony in paying more attention to Downtown Crossing than to the ominous mass email I received from *Phoenix* managers the night before, summoning all staffers to a mandatory meeting. My only concern, at least at the moment, was for the pushcart vendors, and I was nearly through writing my column about them when Stephen Mindich, longtime publisher of the *Phoenix*, walked into the newsroom and asked for everyone's attention. The *Phoenix*, he announced, had printed its last issue. We were all out of a job.

The aftermath has been bittersweet. Thanks in part to our robust alumnae network, many of my colleagues landed gigs within weeks of our closing. We still drink pitchers every Thursday, though, cherishing our time together like separated foster kids visiting siblings. We moan about the quirky editors for whom we're now slaving, and about how our ideas scare the shoes off of them. We've found that it's generally considered bad taste to smoke pot in the bathrooms of our new workplaces. Mostly, we commiserate about the state of journalism. In its essence, it's the same conversation that alt-media masochists have been having since Sam and John Adams were hanging at the Green Dragon tavern, guzzling ale and gunning for the Stamp Act in their own weekly, the *Boston Gazette*.



Though I've long considered myself an inheritor of a broad alternative tradition, after being laid off, I realized that I actually knew little about how various alternatives got started, about the cult characters behind them, and other details that might help me contextualize my place in time. With that in mind, my gut move after the *Phoenix* folded, after getting good and drunk a few times, was to spelunk my history in an attempt to understand whether fringe media—and fringe journalists like me—had a future.

I first cracked John McMillian's excellent 2011 book, *Smoking Typewriters*, which bolstered my knowledge of the impact that the underground press had on the '60s. Next, I turned to David Armstrong's 1981 bible on alternative American media, *A Trumpet to Arms*. This was the book I'd been searching for to help chart my professional course. *A Trumpet to Arms*, like *Smoking Typewriters*, is based on a series of interviews with alt-media pioneers. A former editor of the influential *Berkeley Barb* in the mid-'70s, Armstrong was able to leverage his credentials and connections to score revealing stories from a wide range of counterculture stalwarts: the political cartoonist Ron Cobb; Steve Post, a free-form radio pioneer and early WBAI host; and John Shuttleworth, the former ad executive who started *Mother Earth News* out of his Ohio farmhouse in 1970, to name just a few.

Where *Trumpet* differs from McMillian's work, however, is in its sense of history and scope. *Smoking Typewriters* focuses primarily on the 1960s as the defining decade for the underground press. But *A Trumpet to Arms* begins long before Vietnam radicalized Baby Boomers, and addresses alt-media developments all the way through 1980. By covering underground feats from the American Revolution, to the women's suffrage movement, to the age of nuclear proliferation, Armstrong connects rabble-rousers throughout history—and makes clear that the alt-media ethic existed long before the Summer of Love.

I've only been contributing to the alternative press for a decade. But in that time, I've witnessed modern theaters of every battle in this book: the debate over escort ads; the fight to organize newsrooms; the arrests of journalists.

## We learn of vast contributions from a kaleidoscopic cast of outsiders who were misrepresented by the mainstream media.

But only now, peering back through the lens of *A Trumpet to Arms*, do I realize that while a lot of methodology has changed—I have a phone, camera, post office, and encyclopedia in my pants pocket—the purpose of alternative media has not. My peers are simply the latest longshots against Goliath in a predictable and cyclical race to record history as one sees fit.

*A Trumpet to Arms* is out of print and essentially forgotten these days—it was last published by South End Press in 1999. Nevertheless, the book packs timely, relevant insights about the enduring cycles of alternative media, and it does so with style. Armstrong shows why the alternative press is, was, and will remain a crucial cultural force, and demonstrates that while certain books and publications may cease printing, this journalistic legacy will live on.

IN 1980, RIGHT AROUND THE TIME when Armstrong was finishing *A Trumpet to Arms*, the liberalism that characterized much of the previous two decades was vanishing. A score of formerly aggressive alternative media outlets were shedding their activist leanings in favor of softer news that played friendlier alongside stereo ads. *The New Haven Advocate* and the *Aquarian* in New Jersey, notes Armstrong, began covering fashion. The *Phoenix* went so far as to release a four-color, glossy insert—an ode to urban pampering—called *Savor*. Against that backdrop, and with the bogeyman Ronald Reagan taking office, the apathetic climate was ideal for a book charting the alt media's past, present, and potential future.

Seeing hope in the lessons of old struggles, Armstrong describes the adventures behind some of the most innovative publications in US history. *A Trumpet to Arms* spans more than two centuries of underground press movements, all spurred by Americans

looking to petition some kind of authority or oppressor. The book opens by saluting the pamphleteer Thomas Paine—by Armstrong's account, an American alt-media originator—whose 1775 poem "The Liberty Tree" inspired the book's title. From there, we learn of vast contributions from a kaleidoscopic cast of gays, blacks, laborers, and others who were not just misrepresented in the so-called traditional news media, but were also maligned and degraded by them. Take, for example, *The Revolution*, a furnace of rousing contrarianism founded by early feminist polemicists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In an issue printed in 1868, Stanton wrote, "We declare war to the death on the idea that woman was made for man. . . . We proclaim the higher truth that, like man, she was created by God for Individual Moral Responsibility and progress here and forever." In response, the *New York Sunday Times* advised Stanton to "attend a little more to her domestic duties and a little less to those of the great public." Armstrong doesn't have to ruminate on how he feels about such shameful episodes; his anecdotes tell the story.

Armstrong uses the phrase "alternative media" to describe a wide variety of outlets, from the underground newspapers of the 1960s to well-funded national magazines like *Ms*. That's not to say that all alternative outlets were the same. In addition to being a former editor of the *Barb* and the *Syracuse New Times*, the author had also written about alt-media for several publications, including *CJR*. Those years as a researcher and participant had revealed to Armstrong few recurring themes between, say, Paul Krassner's biting satirical magazine, *The Realist*, and the holistic new-age journals of the 1970s. At the same time, the author notes that all of these entities shared certain things in common. Unlike daily broadsheets



and network newscasts, which pushed status-quo ideals, alt reporters experimented with bizarre and idiosyncratic writing styles, all while covering taboo topics like sexuality, political protest, and full-blown revolution.

In the process, they didn't just reinvent journalism, they also refashioned its presentation. Using delirious illustrations, ragged right text, abstract collages, and other novel techniques, indie artists changed magazine design in ways that bled into the mainstream as early as the '60s. Armstrong celebrates these milestones subtly, allowing others to sing the praises. In one case, the author quotes noted alt publisher Richard Neville, who helped usher in the psychedelic sheen of hippie periodicals: "When did you last frame a page of the *Times*?" he asks an interviewer.

THE HOSTILITY BETWEEN COMMERCIAL and alternative attitudes is an ancient and recurring theme in media. But perhaps because *A Trumpet to Arms* pre-dates the contemporary war on mainstream journalism, in which partisan pugilism too often passes for media criticism, Armstrong is able to revisit the underground press revolution without endlessly bemoaning *The New York Times* and its exalted ilk. Instead of haranguing, the author acknowledges the inherent codependence of the suit-and-sandal castes:

Within society as a whole, the alternative media are catalytic, introducing new concepts and values which society then accepts (usually with modifications) or rejects.... The relationship of alternative media to the dominant society is, of course, two-way. Not only do ideas introduced by alternative media modify society, they are also themselves modified in the course of being absorbed by mainstream culture. In effect, the mass media, through which the public is introduced directly to those ideas, use the alternative media for research and development.

More than any other quality, Armstrong grants alternative status based on a publication's readiness to cover controversial stories with neither apology nor delay, long before the mainstream takes those topics up. Armstrong

mentions oft-forgotten Native-American papers that fought racist laws, as well as little-known magazines like *CounterSpy*, which *Village Voice* co-founder Norman Mailer helped start, whose goal was to impugn surveillance agencies.

There's also the ecological press movement, which, among other things, *A Trumpet to Arms* credits with transforming the way Americans eat. Armstrong was spot-on in his assessment of tree-hugger publishers; since germinating in the late-1960s, healthy and holistic ideals have been embraced far beyond the ideological left. Additional space is dedicated to the more than 560 feminist publications that sprouted between 1968 and 1973, and to the role that women had in writing the alternative playbook.

Moving forward, Armstrong dedicates a great deal of space to the range of papers that proliferated to protest American aggression in Southeast Asia: from the Toronto-based *Amex-Canada*, which catered to draft dodgers in exile, to newsletters that turned up on military bases, like *Up Against the Bulkhead* and *The Last Harass*. The stories of these classic alternatives are fascinating: alt icon Ray Mungo stealing printing equipment to start his Liberation News Service in 1967; reporters from *Rat*, a scrappy SDS spinoff, covering the campus-wide student revolt at Columbia University in 1968.

In his most eloquent entries, Armstrong demeans the cowardice and laziness of mainstream outlets without sounding like a sour counterculture cheerleader. Facts, after all, are facts, and the fact is that it took *The New York Times* until 1966 to report on the American-led massacre in North Vietnam—nine months after the daring peacenik magazine *Ramparts* published what Armstrong calls a "comprehensive condemnation of the US Army's conduct."

Reading *A Trumpet to Arms* around the decennial anniversary of the Iraq War, I couldn't help but think about contemporary mainstream outfits. Despite more than a decade of bloodshed in the Middle East, the 10-year mark of the invasion was hardly acknowledged in any meaningful form, let alone roundly condemned as the costly debacle that it

was. In Boston, my local tabloid quoted a soldier on page 1 boasting: "I would absolutely do it again. I wouldn't change a thing."

The *Phoenix* would have been the first to call out such hawkish idiocy. Unfortunately, the anniversary came four days after we shut down, as did the plethora of tall tales about American success on that front. In the weeks and months that followed, the *Phoenix* was also missed as Boston's five-term mayor, Thomas Menino, announced plans to retire, setting off a 16-way scrap for the ages, and in the wake of the Boston Marathon bombings, as media from all over the world proved incapable of communicating the region's proudly provincial quirkiness. Starting moments after the explosions, a number of publications reached out to me for dispatches. But while the BBC, *The American Prospect*, and a few others took my input seriously, the bigs like CNN and Huffington Post asked me to chase puff pieces with the robot media that had parachuted in. Editors at those places didn't seem interested in my knowledge of the city, or the people who live there. They just wanted more of the same Boston Strong hero-worship they had been peddling all week. Needless to say, the ordeal served as a reminder of how special the *Phoenix* was, and how fortunate I'd been to work there.

AS MASS MEDIA CONTINUES TO CONSOLIDATE, and fewer companies control more venues, peripheral voices have been pushed farther out of public reach and relegated to incestuously amplified comment sewers in obscure orbits of the Internet. In that dystopian context, *A Trumpet to Arms* is infinitely more important now than it was in 1981. As it reads, the book can help one navigate the labyrinth of modern media. Pick any paragraph, substitute the word "blog" for "printing press," and Armstrong's research is as good as updated.

The *déjà vu* is hard to ignore. As Armstrong notes, during his own heyday at the *Barb*, "The flirtation between rock and revolution was a quarrelsome one, ending when rock stars jilted their would-be radical allies." Such has been my own experience, as hip-hop artists who helped radicalize me—Common,

Mos Def, Ice Cube—have traded in their underground appeal for sitcom roles and corporate sponsorships. As for avant-garde business prototypes, Armstrong explains that the alternatives have been crowd-funding since William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the abolitionist siren *The Liberator*, was beaten by a pro-slavery mob and dragged across the cobblestones of old Boston.

Armstrong takes into account the internal conflicts over sex, drugs, and power that crippled some alternative ventures, as well as the constant threat of co-option posed by a mainstream that was becoming decreasingly distinguishable from its subterranean doppelganger. In a few captious passages, Armstrong points to the apparent hypocrisy of some alternative media. He reports, for example, that a 1980 conference for the National Association of Newsweeklies featured a cocktail hour atop Bank of America's corporate headquarters. The author hits such critical notes loud-est in a chapter titled "Ten Great Places to Find Croissants After Midnight," in which he scrutinizes "urban weeklies of the seventies" for soothing, rather than challenging readers, and for subsequently neutralizing "large segments of America's most activist generation."

I've felt the same way about my own publication. But even after the *Phoenix* transitioned to a glossy magazine format six months before it died, focusing more on lifestyle frills than I may have liked, I knew the drill. Restaurant reviews attract more eyeballs and advertisers than do investigative features. They always have, and probably always will. Technically speaking, before absorbing the more literary *Cambridge Phoenix* and, later on, the rival *Real Paper*, Mindich launched his empire with *Boston After Dark*, which was primarily a source of music listings and reviews.

As Armstrong reports, neither the *Phoenix* nor its alt-weekly contemporaries were designed to be overtly radical or styled solely to provide entertainment news. Instead, they were adaptive vehicles—adored for their "use of the personal voice in writing; their willingness to do in-depth, magazine-style features about issues generally skimmed by daily newspapers"—that reacted to whatever readers needed at a given

## My editors at the *Phoenix* once let me report from the Democratic National Convention on acid.

moment. Sometimes, that was advice on which new bands to worship; other times, it was a unifying drum to follow into protest. Though I never scored a single cover story in the sleek new *Phoenix*, editors still gave me ample inches to publish investigative pieces, wage class warfare, and, in one instance, report from the Democratic National Convention on acid.

Considering my own experience, it's natural that I found *A Trumpet to Arms* to be at its most dramatic when it flashes back to the cultural mayhem of the '60s, from Black Panther papers having their distribution lines cut by government saboteurs to the arrest and even murder of key alternative players. Armstrong brightly illustrates the summer of 1968, when underground sheets like the *Seed* helped lure thousands of young people to protest the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. As the history books now show—thanks to detailed documentation by alternative outlets—chaos ensued for that entire week, on a scale that would only erupt sporadically across America for years to follow. That was true until 2011, when Occupy Wall Street protesters, along with their own media networks, surfaced from coast to coast in the tradition of the many aforementioned crusaders, and like those before them, were indiscriminately beaten and imprisoned.

Along with hundreds of other maverick reporters who filled voids left by the mainstream's generally shallow coverage of Occupy, I followed the encampment era up close and all across the country. In my travels, I bonded with other sympathetic journalists. Some gave me a couch to crash on; others shared sources, photographs, and inside

information. Even then, I was aware of a connection to the fringe media of protests past—especially after reporting on last year's demonstrations outside of the NATO summit in Chicago. At a rally in Grant Park, I asked one officer about the chipped and battered old batons that a few of his colleagues were wielding. Avoiding eye contact, the cop whispered without moving his lips, "That's his daddy's from '68."

The experience in Chicago alerted me to the all-powerful, multigenerational enemy with which alternative media is at perpetual odds. I'm prepared for that battle, and also hopeful that the marginal press will live at least as long as the agents we ride against.

Like Armstrong, I plan to play a part in keeping alt ideals alive. I recently teamed with another local weekly—*Dig Boston*, where I started my career in 2004—to convene a gang of young dissidents to trade ideas and network regularly. So far it's gone well, with more than a dozen eager writers whose interests range from dismantling Monsanto to reporting on the oft-forgotten corners of the city's minority neighborhoods. I'm uncertain of what will come of our efforts in the longer term—if the appetite for passionate reporting will eventually erode entirely, or if we can carry on tradition, and sound a trumpet to arms. Wherever this trampled road takes me, I'll use Armstrong's wisdom as a compass:

When one underground enterprise succeeded, all the others were strengthened.... This did not only benefit activists. The public benefited, too, from the much greater availability of new visions and values, which broadened the political, cultural, and spiritual options of millions.... Without [the alternative press], the counterculture and the New Left would not have taken root and flourished.

Amen. **CJR**

CHRIS FARAONE is the author of the Occupy road journal, *99 Nights with the 99 Percent*, which he published on his own imprint, *Write To Power Books*. He is currently working on a follow-up titled *I Killed Breitbart...* and *Countless Other Causes of Conservative Consternation*.

# DC deep-freeze

Pols no longer need us more than we need them

BY JAMES ROSEN

THE VOICE ON THE OTHER END OF THE line was grave. It belonged to Kristie Greco, the top leadership aide to Representative James Clyburn. As the No. 3 Democrat in the House, Clyburn, a one-time civil rights activist from South Carolina, is the most prominent African-American member of Congress. He's got close ties to both minority leader Nancy Pelosi and Valerie Jarrett, the senior White House adviser and longtime friend of the Obamas whom Washington insiders consider the power behind the throne. "There will be consequences," Greco told me.

Clyburn was angry about an article I had published that day, May 25, 2011, in which the congressman blamed most of President Obama's political problems on the color of his skin. I later learned that Jarrett had phoned Clyburn within hours of my piece going online—where it drew hundreds of comments, more than any other previous article of mine in such a short period—and taken him to the woodshed for focusing on race, a topic the country's first black president tries to avoid. Clyburn insisted I sensationalized his comments.

The consequences were immediate: Clyburn stopped talking to me, even though McClatchy, my employer, owns five papers in South Carolina, including the largest, *The State*, which is in the congressman's hometown of Columbia. Overnight, Clyburn's staff, friends, and

associates stopped talking with me. I was dropped from his congressional email list. My messages and calls went unanswered.

Clyburn wasn't the first lawmaker to go mum on me. Six months earlier, Republican Joe Wilson, infamous for his "You lie!" outburst during Obama's 2009 healthcare address to a joint session of Congress, stopped all contact, too. His beef was with a series of stories I'd written on an ethics probe into his use of per diem foreign-travel funds.

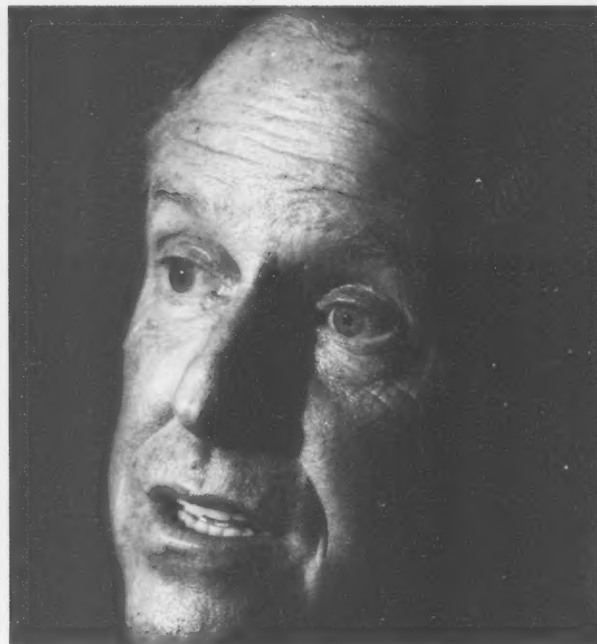
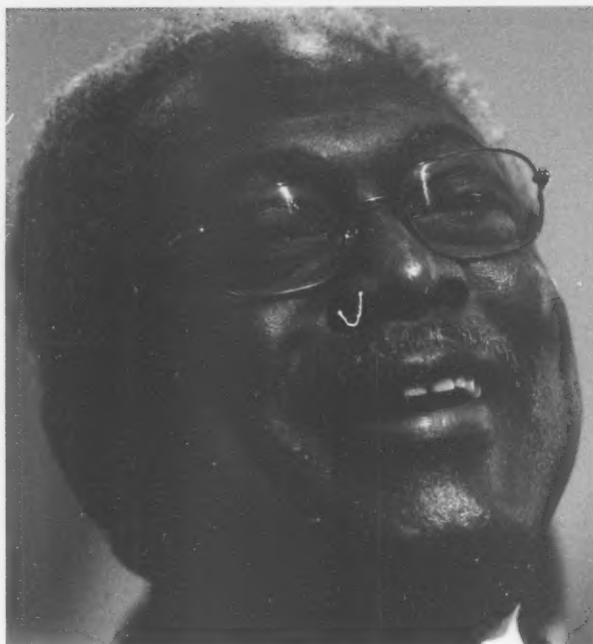
Colleagues say I must be doing something right if I've irritated two members of Congress who are among the most liberal (Clyburn) and the most conservative (Wilson). But as this freezeout has dragged on, I've come to view their petulant stances as extreme expressions of a broader and more destructive effort in Washington politics to marginalize independent journalism.

Politicians giving reporters the silent treatment is an old tactic, of course, but in the past it was almost always temporary. Greco's imperious dictum crystallized a sense that had been growing in me during the most recent of my 19 years in Washington: Many elected representatives no longer view talking with independent reporters as part of their duty in American democracy, but rather as a privilege to be granted or withdrawn as reward or punishment for coverage deemed favorable or unfavorable.

CLYBURN AND WILSON'S DECISIONS TO shun me seemingly without end are just the most radical of a series of changes in how Washington officeholders treat reporters that reflect this more mercenary and dismissive view of a free press. For instance, there is the increased use of talking points and other attempts at total message control; the growing employment of political consultants and congressional offices that are run like campaign operations; the now common demand for pre-publication quote approval; and the shrinking opportunities for journalists to question elected officials without the duress of conference calls (on which you may or may not get to ask something), gang-bangs in the halls of Congress with 20 other reporters, or the demand for written questions in advance.

In his purported search for national security leaks, Obama's aggressive actions against reporters—authorizing his Justice Department to snoop through the emails and phone records of AP journalists and Fox News's James Rosen (no relation) are just the latest examples—have exacerbated the deterioration of relations between pols and reporters. "Journalists have often been frustrated by what they see as a disdainful and belittling attitude toward them by members of the White House's communications office," the *Washington Post's* Paul Farhi wrote in May.

Politicians may not have a constitutional or even an ethical obligation to speak with journalists, but they have a civic responsibility to do so. That's how our representative government works: The press serves as a check on government on the public's behalf. It's an idea that goes back to the country's founding. Despite scurrilous attacks on him from what were then highly partisan newspapers, Thomas Jefferson was a lifelong defender of a free press as a "fourth estate" that he considered at least as essential as the three main branches he helped design. "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter," he famously wrote to a friend in 1787 during the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.



**Look who's not talking** Clyburn, left, and Wilson's decisions to shut the author out are part of a larger effort to bypass the press.

There is no single or simple explanation for this change in the press's relationship with elected officials. Bruce Cain, a Stanford University political scientist, points to, among other things, "the professionalization of politics" and the increased use of outside consultants who urge candidates to stay on message at all costs, a practice that has helped turn governing into a permanent campaign.

And Washington reporters aren't without blame for their increasingly adversarial relationship with politicians, given the cynical and superficial nature of so much political coverage. For instance, journalists praised both Obama and President George W. Bush during their initial White House runs for their disciplined campaigns and ability to hammer home their carefully honed messages over and over. At the same time, each was crucified for the occasional speaking gaffe, the kind of misstep that is all too human. If we're talking about message politics, the clear message politicians get from journalists is: Play it safe, avoid impromptu comments, and minimize the need to answer tough questions.

But the evolution of ever-more-sophisticated ways for politicians to

communicate directly with constituents and supporters is clearly a big part of what's happening, too. From partisan outlets such as Fox News and MSNBC to the explosion of social media, politicians have all sorts of ways to avoid inconvenient questions from reporters. Why bother with us when they've got their own networks, magazines, websites, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and blast emails?

KEVIN DIAZ, A WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENT for the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, is getting the silent treatment from Representative Michele Bachmann because of his coverage of alleged campaign-finance violations tied to her 2012 run for the Republican presidential nomination. Thanks to that run, Bachmann has a huge nationwide email list and a Twitter following of tens of thousands of conservative activists. She doesn't need reporters like Diaz to get her message out or raise money. "If there's an information superhighway, we're increasingly on the off-ramps," Diaz says. "We don't matter as much as we used to."

It was telling that Bachmann didn't hold a news conference in late May

when she announced that she won't seek re-election to Congress, opting instead to release a slick online video. "We must be able to poke and meddle," objected *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni, in the wake of Bachmann's sidestep. "It may not be a pretty sight, and we journalists may not be doing it in a pretty way, but eliminate that and you wind up with something even less pretty: Bachmann, robotically composed, telling you that she's quitting for purely high-minded reasons, with the vigor of the republic foremost in her heart. That's a whole lot further from the truth than anything we wretched scribes put out."

Bachmann's reach is dwarfed by Obama's online orbit of more than 32 million Twitter followers and a massive email list fed by White House aides and Organizing for Action, the powerful political apparatus now run by the president's 2012 campaign manager, Jim Messina.

On April 19, just before midnight and shortly after Obama had commented on the capture of Boston bombing suspect Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, Dan Pfeiffer, a senior adviser to Obama, retweeted a typical digital communiqué, this one from



Alex Morgan, a star on the 2012 Olympic gold-medal-winning women's soccer team. "Watching the news and feeling patriotic," Morgan tweeted to her nearly 1.2 million followers. "Gotta love pres Obama's speeches."

In the old days—not even 20 years ago—lawmakers sent printed letters to constituents using a congressional postage system called franking. In 1996, I reported that Republican Senator Lauch Faircloth of North Carolina was among the Senate's top frankers, a taxpayer-funded perk that contradicted his regular rhetorical bashing of Big Government. Most lawmakers, however, sent franked letters only from time to time. Today, politicians' constant online presence, maintained by armies of staffers and outside hired guns, surely costs Americans much more than the quaint system of franking ever did, and yet it's accepted as business as usual in our digital lives.

Facebook even runs secretive seminars at which it trains lawmakers and their aides how to exploit social media. I tweeted a message to Adam Conner, Facebook's 28-year-old public-policy manager in Washington who runs the seminars, to ask for an interview, but he didn't respond. Instead, I received an email from a Facebook PR staffer named Brandon Lepow, who first sounded cooperative but ended up emailing his regrets. "Unfortunately we aren't going to be able to accommodate your request for an interview," Lepow wrote. "However, if you are looking for something to use for your story, feel free to attribute the following to a Facebook spokesperson: 'Facebook is excited to be a major communication platform where members of Congress and other elected officials can engage with their constituents on important issues that matter in their district and state.'"

Feel free, indeed. Ironically, this kind of non-answer echoes the responses reporters routinely receive from lawmakers these days.

Digital technology has changed the interaction between Washington pols and reporters in other ways, too. The traditional phone and in-person interviews are often augmented, and at times replaced, by email exchanges. While convenient, these exchanges give lawmakers more opportunity to rehearse

and rehash their responses to questions. Worse, the responses are often crafted by congressional flacks whose role as Internet intermediaries is easily concealed.

---

## Facebook runs secretive seminars at which it trains lawmakers and their aides how to exploit social media—on the taxpayer's dime.

In a July 15, 2012, article, *New York Times* reporter Jeremy Peters claimed that it was becoming "the default position" for Washington correspondents to grant their sources pre-publication "quote approval" and to make changes if they wished. In a speech at the National Press Club the following week, James Asher, McClatchy's Washington bureau chief, announced that he had prohibited the practice among his reporters and called on other news organizations to follow suit. The Associated Press and the *National Journal* took similar stances, and *The New York Times* imposed new restrictions.

From the fiscal cliff to threats of government shutdowns, we are constantly reminded that American politics has become more ideologically hardline, less open to compromise. The marginalization of independent journalism is both a consequence of this partisan gridlock (the right has used the liberal-media bogeyman to inoculate itself against criticism for more than 40 years) and part of the reason that gridlock is able to endure. If an elected official only communicates with the public either directly, via social media, or through "friendly" press, his ideas and statements never get scrutinized, let alone challenged; there is no need to compromise because he is always able to claim to be doing "what the public wants." So we end up with phony and absurd debates like the endless prattle over "death panels" in Obamacare, which has resurfaced most of the 37 times the House has voted to repeal the landmark health-insurance law, most recently in mid-May.

I'VE TRIED TO PATCH THINGS UP WITH Wilson and Clyburn. While covering the federal trial over South Carolina's voter-ID law in August 2012, I interviewed the state Attorney General Alan Wilson, the

congressman's son, who had sued the Justice Department for blocking the law under the Voting Rights Act.

After our interview, I asked Wilson if he would help broker a rapprochement with his father. The next time we talked, he told me that his father was amenable to détente. I followed up by stopping by the congressman's office and leaving him a handwritten note.

In February, I covered Clyburn when he spoke at Lincoln's Cottage in Washington to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation and the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Afterward, I asked if we could re-establish communications. "I don't have a problem with that," he said. "But I need to run it by Hope."

Hope Derrick is Clyburn's communications director. I was taken aback. "But you're Hope's boss," I said. "You're the congressman."

I thought I saw a glimmer of regret pass through his eyes. "I don't want to throw my staff under the bus," he said. "You can understand that."

Returning to our office, I described the encounter to my bureau chief, and asked if he would follow up with Derrick. He sent her an email relaying Clyburn's willingness to hit reset. Her response arrived forthwith: "Nothing has changed, and we will not be providing direct access for Mr. Rosen," she wrote.

As for Wilson, I'm still waiting for an answer to the note I left with his aides. **CJR**

---

JAMES ROSEN is a reporter in the McClatchy Washington bureau.

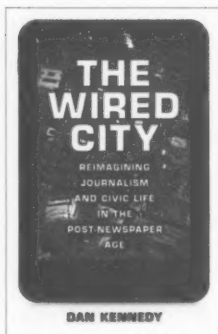
# News havens

Dan Kennedy shows why news startups matter

BY MICHAEL MEYER

THE NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT IS ALMOST surely the smallest news organization ever chronicled at book length. Founded in 2005 by veteran journalist Paul Bass as a nonprofit publishing exclusively online, it employs five full-time journalists to cover a city of 130,000. It writes straightforward local news stories about community meetings and crimes and government. And, according to the Independent's own biographer, media critic Dan Kennedy, there's no guarantee that it will survive beyond the next few years. It says a great deal about the state of journalism that we're willing to look into such tiny corners of the industry for hope and inspiration. It says even more that such a look can prove worthwhile.

Kennedy, an assistant professor of journalism at Northeastern University and a former media columnist for the late *Boston Phoenix*, spent nearly four years observing the Independent, interviewing reporters and readers, and analyzing everything from the site's coverage of a murder case to its handling of online comments. His new book, *The Wired City*, is the result. Though the book bills itself as a study in "reimagining journalism and civic life in the post-newspaper age," Kennedy doesn't really spend much time on grand pronouncements or prescriptions for the future of local journalism. Rather, he delivers a thorough and sober chronicling of one



**The Wired City:**  
Reimagining Journalism  
and Civic Life in the Post-  
Newspaper Age

By Dan Kennedy  
University of Massachusetts Press  
192 pages, paper \$22.95

"post-newspaper" news startup and its relationship to the city it covers.

While the local news startup space varies widely—from sites that are little more than a single journalist relying on reader donations to nonprofits with multi-million-dollar annual budgets—all startups are relative frail when compared with the expectations placed on them by the industry at large. When discussed in abstract terms, startups are expected to be the standard bearers of journalistic innovation. When discussed in specific terms, the field is far too diverse to summarize, with

a few better-funded startups meeting these expectations, and others barely getting by.

Kennedy puts the Independent in context by calling it "one of about a half-dozen local and regional online-only news sites that are large enough and ambitious enough to have established themselves as a significant new journalistic genre." Though Kennedy's criteria for including organizations in this headcount are vague, his list includes most, if not all, of the startups that have gained notoriety in the larger industry, most notably Texas Tribune, Voice of San Diego, MinnPost, and the St. Louis Beacon. The Independent is relatively small compared to the likes of Texas Tribune, which employs more than 20 journalists. But the Independent earns its keep as a nonprofit by reporting on "efforts to reform New Haven's troubled public schools; development proposals large and small; retail-level politics; traffic; and issues involving the city's police department..."

None of these issues, according to Kennedy, were being covered with any real depth or consistency by the *New Haven Register* or other local outlets. While Kennedy says that he sometimes finds himself "wishing for more perspective in the Independent's stories," he thinks that, given its limited resources, Bass has made the right decision to run the site as a breaking-news service publishing short items. Despite its small size, the Independent succeeds in covering many issues comprehensively.

Kennedy spends a good deal of time getting to know the reporters at the Independent and chronicling their daily routine. Bass, the veteran New Haven newspaper reporter who founded the Independent, is mentioned often. (The focus on Bass is very much warranted because, as Kennedy writes, "the Independent would not exist if Bass hadn't come to New Haven.") But Kennedy also frequently ventures outside the Independent's newsroom to document just what kind of impact, if any, the publication is having on the community.

Kennedy's efforts to talk to consumers of journalism are hugely important. The relationship of a newspaper or radio station to its community is generally well understood; the relationship of an

online-only nonprofit to its community far less so. In the case of New Haven, at least, Kennedy makes a compelling argument that, even with its small newsroom, the Independent is able to have the kind of impact it (and its funders) are hoping for, and is an effective "force for civic improvement" in New Haven. Kennedy's analysis stands as a rigorous proof of concept for the work of the Independent and its peers.

THE WIRED CITY DOESN'T HAVE ANYTHING resembling a central thesis. (This isn't a flaw. Way too many "future of journalism" books and reports waste their time trying to argue grand, overarching theses that almost always fall apart on closer analysis.) But on the rare occasion that Kennedy does try to make a larger point about the journalism industry, he usually addresses what he sees as the benefits of the nonprofit over the for-profit model in local journalism.

Many of his points regarding the benefits of that model rely on a sloppy taxonomy. (By nonprofit he seems to mean "well-funded nonprofit," a definition that ignores the many small, bootstrapped nonprofit operations that exist throughout the country.) His conclusion—that for-profits are often smaller and weaker than their nonprofit counterparts—becomes much more complicated when small nonprofits (not to mention the few well-funded, for-profit startups) are thrown into the mix. But his point is certainly true on a case-by-case basis, and his analysis of these cases is worthwhile.

To present one of these cases, Kennedy visits Hartford, CT, where he looks at the for-profit CT News Junkie and the nonprofit CT Mirror. (One weakness of Kennedy's book is that all but one of the startups he visits is within driving distance of his home in Boston.) Both the Mirror and the News Junkie are run by veterans of the newspaper industry, and both offer quality coverage of state-house news. But while the News Junkie scrapes by as a for-profit thanks to tireless work by reporter/owner Christine Stuart and her husband and business manager, Doug Hardy, the nonprofit Mirror was "born big, on the strength of \$1.8 million in foundation grants intended to pay for its first three years."

## Startups are frail compared with the expectations we have for them.

As a result, the Mirror was able to employ nine journalists in 2011, a year in which Stuart had no full-time reporters. Significantly, Kennedy notes that the nonprofit Mirror impeded News Junkie's hopes of earning revenue off of syndicated content by offering its own state-house coverage to Connecticut newspapers free of charge.

Kennedy expands his analysis of the for-profit news startup scene by visiting Batavia, NY, where a site called the Batavian earns revenue by running a high volume of small, affordable display ads for local businesses. He also takes a look at Baristanet, based in the affluent New Jersey suburbs, which also earns significant revenue and competes toe-to-toe with Patch, but which isn't a source of a full-time salary for anyone, journalist or otherwise. Kennedy praises the journalism offered by these sites, but notes that their budgets, newsrooms, and missions are less substantial than those of the Independent and its nonprofit startup brethren. (Kennedy also notes that many of the same challenges faced by small startups are faced by *San Diego CityBeat*, a struggling alt-weekly, which has shared a city with the nonprofit Voice of San Diego for nearly a decade. When Kennedy dropped by San Diego, *CityBeat's* editor was personally updating a database of bar and club listings, a task not required of any of the staff at Voice.)

Kennedy's conclusion: "[E]ntrepreneurs can launch lively local websites and make enough money to keep them going. What they lack is a business model robust enough to fund the sort of in-depth reporting that we associate with newspapers"—something he argues that the large nonprofits can, in fact, do.

Kennedy should be commended for his honest analysis of the challenges faced by many small for-profit startups,

and his acknowledgment of the importance of the work they produce in the face of these challenges. But his conclusion that large nonprofits are in the best position to fill the gaps left by newspapers is a bit too rosy, or at least incomplete. Kennedy does note that while large nonprofits have proven that they can match (and even exceed) newspapers in quality, they have yet to match newspapers and their larger staffs in terms of the volume of coverage they produce.

But a significant oversight is his failure to mention the well-funded for-profits that don't fit into his "nonprofits=big, for-profits=small" taxonomy. As Kennedy rightly points out, many of the benefits of large nonprofits come from their ability to fund in-depth reporting. And yet I know of at least two significant startups that are able to fund that kind of journalism with a for-profit model. Both *This Land Press* in Tulsa, OK, and *Alaska Dispatch*, in Anchorage, were "born big" but owe their genesis to private investment rather than foundation grants. Both produce excellent journalism, and both have made significant gains in earning revenue beyond their investment capital.

This isn't to say that these startups are necessarily better positioned for long-term survival than Kennedy's nonprofits, only that for-profit startups have proven capable of bringing in money and wielding the resulting journalistic firepower—and the industry is better for it. I've often wondered why more wealthy individuals haven't helped journalists launch large, ambitious organizations devoted to for-profit accountability journalism, particularly since major foundations aren't giving many people a chance to do that these days.

Ultimately, though, *The Wired City* transcends the exhausting debate over what journalism startups should look like. It gets at a more fundamental point: that news startups, both for-profit and nonprofit, matter. Their coverage is taking hold in their communities. They're worthy of funding from foundations and private investors alike. And they're worthy of serious, long-term study. **CJR**

MICHAEL MEYER, a CJR staff writer, runs the *Guide to Online News Startups* at [CJR.org](http://CJR.org).

# Wingnut commander

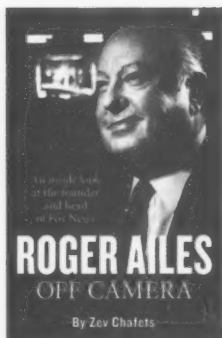
Roger Ailes, Fox News, and the future of journalism

BY JIM SLEEPER

WHEN I PUBLISHED *LIBERAL RACISM* in 1997 (with a chapter on how *The New York Times* was misrepresenting racial politics under editorial-page editor Howell Raines), I was interviewed on Fox News, which I'd barely heard of, by Bill O'Reilly, whom I hadn't heard of at all. The encounter was anodyne, but before long I noticed that the network was not. Under its president Roger Ailes, who had pitched his vision of Fox to a receptive Rupert Murdoch only a year before I met O'Reilly, it was rapidly becoming what Zev Chafets calls "transformational" in American media and political culture. By treating journalism as if it's all about ratings and show, Fox actually makes a profoundly political statement by eviscerating what democratic politics really stands for.

The price we're paying shows up clearly in Chafets's hastily added election-night epilogue to *Roger Ailes Off Camera* (the rest of the book reads as if the 2012 election is yet to come). He shows us Ailes, 71, and Murdoch reacting impassively at Fox headquarters to early indications of the Obama victory—a humiliating setback for its political commentators O'Reilly, Karl Rove, Dick Morris, and Sean Hannity, who've spent the evening, as they have most of the campaign, insisting a Republican victory is imminent.

But Chafets doesn't mention what for journalists was arguably the most



**Roger Ailes Off Camera: An inside look at the founder and head of Fox News**

By Zev Chafets  
Sentinel  
258 pages  
Hardcover \$26.95

important question of the night, Fox anchor Megyn Kelly's exasperated query to Rove: "Is this just math that you do as a Republican to make yourself feel better, or is this real?"

What counts as "real" at Fox News? It can be hard to tell. Upheavals in American news reporting have been driven not only by digitization, globalization, and the concurrent fragmentation of news-consuming publics and their coordinates, but also, and perhaps even more so, by Ailes's perverse marketing genius, which has given the fear

and anger in American politics new and dangerous forms of expression. It also introduces a new ideological spin, to offset "liberal" influence in mainstream media: "Fox may or may not be internally balanced," Chafets writes, "but Ailes is right when he says, 'Sometimes we are the balance.'"

Although Fox ratings have dropped since the election, they'll rebound if fear and anger rise and if Ailes keeps at it. "I don't see a true liberal answer to Fox on the horizon, although MSNBC tries hard," Mark Danner tells Chafets, and MSNBC's own Rachel Maddow agrees: "Roger took some charisma and great ideas for shows and worked magic.... I feel that he has won. If the media were left of center before, they aren't now."

TO SUPPORT HIS CLAIM THAT FOX'S coverage of the election returns was "dispassionate and professional," Chafets mentions Megyn Kelly's election-night, on-camera march over to the Fox Decision Desk after she's listened to Rove repeatedly challenge its decision to call Ohio for Obama. But according to Jonathan Alter in *The Center Holds*, it was Ailes who called from home and ordered the march to rescue some credibility for Fox News. Chafets spins a Pew Center finding that Fox's coverage of President Obama was eight times more negative than positive by explaining that Ailes, who once shielded Richard Nixon from critical interviewers, "understood perfectly well why [Obama] had preferred chatting with Whoopi Goldberg... to a session with Bill O'Reilly." He adds that "MSNBC, Fox's chief cable rival, was far more partisan—only 3 percent of its Romney coverage was positive, 71 percent negative, a ratio of 23-1."

Such schoolyard excuses—"The other guy did it, too!"—pop up often in this book, as does Ailes's and Chafets's penchant for accusing others pre-emptively of whatever Fox is guilty of, so that the mainstream media will report an equivalence. But this doesn't explain Fox's lopsidedly negative news coverage of Obama or MSNBC's retaliatory efforts to fight Fox's fire with its own.

The fire started at Fox when Ailes sensed, as demagogues (and their producers) throughout history have always done, that anyone with enough



money, cleverness, and showmanship to unleash passions that good politics should channel constructively can ride them to power and profit. That's what Cleon did in Thucydides's account of the Athenians' Mytilenian debate; it's what Huey Long, Joe McCarthy, and recent Fox contributors Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin have done by carrying legitimate grievances into brilliant performances that eventually curdle and collapse, tragically or catastrophically, on their own ignorance and lies.

"In television, technology changes," Ailes insists. "The one constant is content. There has to be a show.... Getting ratings is how you get paid"—and a producer tells Chafets that Ailes will "do anything to get ratings." As Neil Cavuto, a Fox anchor and Ailes acolyte, tells Chafets, before Ailes, "Our thought was, Is the story important? not who will watch it." Ailes "forced people to get out of the ivory tower," as Chafets puts it. Cavuto observes that, "You can make a story out of anything," and that Ailes "has imbued an entire generation of producers with his vision."

But the press is the only industry the Constitution exempts from regulation, because its real purpose is to strengthen citizens' public life by helping them uphold public virtues—such as the inclination and ability to deliberate rationally to make sound decisions—that, as you may have noticed, neither the liberal state nor the markets have done much lately to nourish or defend.

That leaves journalism (and other institutions of civil society, like liberal arts colleges) with a big responsibility. Chafets demonstrates that Ailes twists the news reporting and accountability a republic needs by turning its means of survival into its end, using "flashy graphics, bumper music, constant controversies, and nonstop promotion."

But Fox surrenders, or re-targets, journalism not only to entertain but also to stoke and channel rivulets of public anger and fear into torrents of political power. While Chafets touts Ailes, incessantly, as a P.T. Barnum and apostle of profits, those are only two legs of his tripod. The third is his political agenda: more austerity, more pugilism in foreign policy, more rollbacks of public regulation and of labor unions.

## Ailes is playing a longer, slower game than most demagogues do.

Ailes drives it all home with lots of blame-shifting. Fox pundits and Rush Limbaugh—who doesn't work there, but has been mentored by Ailes since 1991 and was profiled by Chafets in *Rush Limbaugh: An Army of One*—accuse liberals of fomenting the class war that Ailes and Limbaugh themselves promote by hyping viewers' working-class resentments and diverting attention from their real causes toward professors, elite journalists, and public regulators.

Casting them as the enemy works for a while, but by election night Fox had become the victim of its own success at blaming liberals for public disasters—the failures in Iraq, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, in the wild

financialization and deregulation that caused the economic meltdown—which most voters realized liberal Democrats hadn't caused, even when liberals had gone along with them.

CHAFETS TELLS US ENOUGH ABOUT Ailes's small-town, Ohio boyhood—as a hemophiliac who was sometimes close to death, with a father who nevertheless beat him—and about his continuing ill health and unhappy personal life (three marriages, the third producing Ailes's only child when he was 59) to suggest the roots of his vision that Chafets doesn't try to untangle and that I won't here.

He tells us that Ailes spent many years as a political consultant, advising Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush, among others (Ailes crafted Bush's infamous Willie Horton ads), before leaving the business in the early 1990s. "I hated politics," Ailes recalls realizing. But his move back to television—to CNBC before selling Murdoch on the idea of Fox—heralded not his liberation from politics but his audacious politicization of TV news.

## HEALTH CARE REPORTING PROJECT FELLOWSHIPS

The AHJ Reporting Fellowships on Health Care Performance will enable journalists to examine local or regional health care systems (or specific elements of a system) to determine what makes them effective or ineffective in delivering care, especially when compared to other systems.

### Fellowship includes:

- Customized seminars (all expenses paid)
- Editing/mentoring assistance
- Up to \$4,000 in travel and research assistance
- A \$2,500 fellowship award



SUPPORTED BY  
THE COMMONWEALTH FUND

See complete details at  
[www.healthjournalism.org/hcp](http://www.healthjournalism.org/hcp)



ASSOCIATION OF HEALTH CARE JOURNALISTS  
CENTER FOR EXCELLENCE IN HEALTH CARE JOURNALISM

# abe FELLOWSHIP FOR JOURNALISTS

International Reporting on  
Topics of Foreign Policy Concern

The Abe Fellowship for Journalists encourages in-depth coverage of important issues affecting the United States and Japan through individual policy-related projects. The maximum stipend is \$23,500 for six weeks of fieldwork.

DEADLINE:  
September 15 Annually

<http://fellowships.ssrc.org/abe>



## COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

to order:

by phone:  
1-888-4-CJR-SUB  
(1-888-425-7782)

online:  
[www.cjr.org/subscribe](http://www.cjr.org/subscribe)

SUBSCRIBE

Chafets's vignettes of Ailes's friendships and charitable gestures don't persuade me that Ailes sees humanity as anything but customers at a circus and fodder for political rampages. Ailes knows that people also yearn for dignity, or at least for escapes from indignity. But when you're as good as he is at using "news" to grope and goose viewers whom your sponsors are ensnaring in coils of corporate fine print and degraded messaging, a lot of them will fall for Fox's characteristic blame-shifting to Obama the socialist and to the liberal mega-financier George Soros, whom Glenn Beck called "The Puppet Master" in a three-part Fox series whose chillingly close parallels to anti-Semitic conspiracy mongering stunned viewers with a sense of history.

Arianna Huffington confronted Ailes about Beck's Soros story when he accepted an invitation from Barbara Walters to appear on ABC. (He seldom goes on TV, but "a friend is a friend," Chafets explains.) "It's not about the word police," Huffington admonished, "It's about something deeper...the paranoid style [used by Beck] is dangerous when there's real pain out there." Ailes promptly accused Huffington of doing the same thing by citing a little known, unpaid Huffington Post blogger who'd written that Ailes looks like J. Edgar Hoover and has a face like a fist.

But Huffington came as close anyone has to warning Ailes before a large audience that he's playing with fire: When you've run out of socialists and terrorists to blame, one of your operatives will always find a few real capitalists—perhaps Jewish ones, like Soros—to split off from the rest, who remain protected.

Chafets understands this danger, perhaps a little too well: After growing up as William Chafets in Pontiac, MI, and at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, he moved to Israel, served in its army, and was Prime Minister Menachem Begin's press officer. Back in the U.S. after 2000, he wrote New York Daily News columns with titles like "How the Israelis Are Helping US Fight Terror War" and "Arafat's 'Womb Bomb' Just Another Delusion."

Although he recently told WNYC's Brian Lehrer that he profiled Limbaugh

and Ailes because he likes "people who change the culture or go against the grain, and people who are contrarians at least within their own profession," surely the fact that Fox is "behind [Israel] all the way," as Ailes puts it, with Limbaugh not far behind, also explains Chafets's eagerness to justify each of them at book length. I think he's also trying to take out some insurance against anti-Semitism as Ailes's "vision" gets scarier. Chafets finesses the story by noting that Ailes has eased Beck out of Fox; he also notes that CNN founder Ted Turner and others liken Murdoch to Hitler—"which would make Roger Ailes a reincarnation of Goebbels," Chafets adds cheekily. But does that *reductio ad absurdum* really end this story?

Chafets seems to think so, making much of Ailes's "friendships" with elite liberals whom he also happens to employ, including sons of Robert Kennedy and Mario Cuomo and the daughter of Jesse Jackson. (Cuomo's son, Chris, left Fox for CNN this year.) He seems to hire them not only for protective coloration but to have them complicit in turning news into a game of money, power, and public relations. Ailes is playing a longer, slower game than most demagogues do.

That leaves high and dry any "ivory tower" liberals who remain thoughtful enough to pose serious questions and find answers that could work if demagoguery didn't eviscerate their legitimacy and funding. The more that that savaging sells, the more that journalists who don't emulate it are left high and dry, too. As Cleon's ancient interlocutor Diodotus lamented, even those with the public interest at heart must appeal to fear and rage to be heard.

Mephistopheles always comes on with a smile, a wink, and promises of shining victories. Ailes and his apologists, like Chafets, have employed and enjoyed these, but they're in for unhappy surprises, and they've got more than a few of us with them on the same slippery slope. **CJR**

JIM SLEEPER, a lecturer in political science at Yale, teaches a seminar there on "Journalism, Liberalism, and Democracy." He was an editorial writer for New York Newsday and a columnist for the New York Daily News. He is the author of *The Closest of Strangers* (1990) and *Liberal Racism* (1997).

## BOOK REVIEW

BY TED RALL

"THE WORLD IS A CARPET" BY ANNA BADKHEN

IN THIS LITTLE BOOK, THE AUTHOR FOLLOWS A FAMILIAR PATTERN: WAR CORRESPONDENT IS SMITTEN BY THE HORRORS AND BEAUTY OF AFGHANISTAN. SHE PICKS A TINY SLICE OF LIFE. STAYS A WHILE. THE MICRO VIEW.

"The clay bubble wrap of Zaydan's domed roofs stretched a mile or so to the south of the minaret, and almond groves to the snow"



SHE STAYS IN ORA, A VILLAGE LEFT BEHIND BY THE CATAclysmic CHANGES OF 12 YEARS OF U.S. OCCUPATION, A BACKWATER SO REMOTE LOCAL AFGHANS HAVE NEVER HEARD OF IT. SHE GETS TO KNOW PEOPLE.



### SOME CRITICISMS

NO POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS.



A TENDENCY TO TAKE AFGHANS LITERALLY.

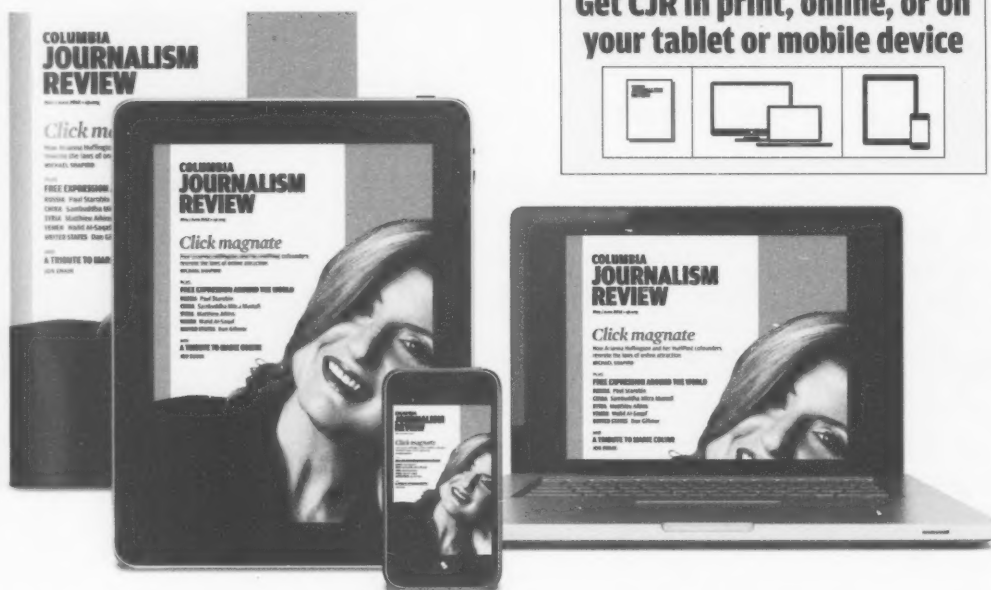


### ADVICE:

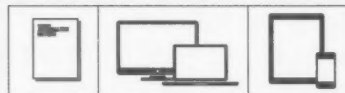
BUY IT. IT WILL HUMANIZE PEOPLE WE MOSTLY VIEW WITH PITY OR SCORN.



# Now available in your favorite digital format!



Get CJR in print, online, or on your tablet or mobile device



Now it's easier than ever to take **Columbia Journalism Review** with you. And new online and digital features make it so convenient to search, save, and share articles.

*Choose your CJR Subscription from these options:*

CJR EDITION	PRICE	SAVINGS
Print + Full Online Access*	\$19.95	Save \$9.75
Full Online Access* Only	\$14.95	Just \$1.24 a month
Print + Digital + Full Online Access*	\$27.95	Save \$21.70

Digital editions for tablets and smartphones also available from iTunes App Store and from other suppliers at [CJR.org/digitalsoptions](http://CJR.org/digitalsoptions)

**Order your subscription at [CJR.org/subscribe](http://CJR.org/subscribe)**

\*Full online access includes all issues published during your subscription term, as well as blogs, research tools, and unlimited use of articles from CJR's last three years' worth of content.

Prices are for one-year subscriptions. CJR is published 6 times per year. Savings are based on the newsstand price of \$4.95.



## BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

BY JAMES BOYLAN

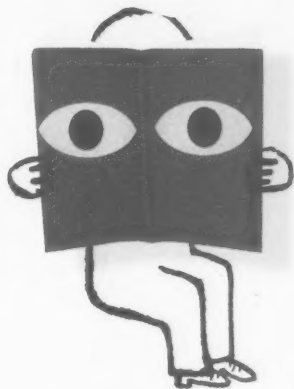
### Cotton Tenants: Three Families

By James Agee and Walker Evans  
Edited by John Summers  
Preface by Adam Haslett  
*The Baffler Magazine*/  
Melville House  
224 pages. Hardcover \$24.95

IN THE SUMMER OF 1936, James Agee, then a young writer for *Fortune*, and Walker Evans, a photographer on loan from the Farm Security Administration, went to Hale County, AL, to prepare an article on the cotton tenant system. But, for unknown reasons, *Fortune* rejected the ensuing story. Undaunted, Agee and Evans worked the article into a book of more than 470 pages titled, obscurely, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Published in 1941, the book sold a few hundred copies, then vanished. It reappeared in 1960, after Agee's death. Agee's extended, often agonized musings—and Evans's classic photographs of tenant families and farms—won it a cult reputation that has lasted to this day.

But what of the missing piece—the article that Agee and Evans were presumably preparing for *Fortune*? Ten years ago, Agee's papers were belatedly presented by his family to the University of Tennessee; they included an extended manuscript titled "Cotton Tenants." John Summers, editor of *The Baffler* magazine, learned of the manuscript and won permission to publish what he believes is the article that *Fortune* spurned.

*Cotton Tenants* is only



distantly a first draft of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Where *Famous Men* is literary, *Cotton Tenants* is journalistic—more direct, less focused on the qualms of the writer, and more clearly portraying the circumstances of the narrow, hard existence of the three white families chosen by Agee and Evans to typify life and labor in the cotton South. A few sentences in *Cotton Tenants* reappear in *Famous Men*, but the framing of the whole is much more focused on the economic vise that holds all—tenant and landlord alike—in its grip. It is a worthy work in its own right.

Which makes one wonder all the more how *Fortune* could have turned it down. It was too long, perhaps, but that could have been dealt with. Too radical? Even so, what harm could it have done the empire of Henry R. Luce? God knows.

### Media Capital: Architecture and Communications in New York City

By Aurora Wallace  
University of Illinois Press  
178 pages  
Hardcover \$80, paperback \$25

IN MEDIA CAPITAL, AURORA Wallace of New York

University contemplates the skyscraper as an expression of the imperial age of the New York press. In the latter 19th century, three of New York's largest newspapers abandoned humble quarters in borrowed buildings and erected towers along Manhattan's Park Row that symbolically competed with the great palaces of government, finance, and religion. First came the *Times* in 1858, five stories tall. Whitelaw Reid's *Tribune* put up a building with a clock tower that surpassed the *Times* and everything else. The *Times* put up a taller building on its original site. Then Joseph Pulitzer topped them all with an adjacent gold-domed skyscraper for *The World*. But nothing is permanent in newspapers, then or now. Newspaper offices moved uptown, and the *Tribune* and *World* towers were demolished. The only surviving structure of the glory days of Park Row is the *Times* building, now owned by Pace University. Wallace provides informative background and intelligent discussion of the skyscraper culture, its delusions, and some of its uptown successors.

### Death Zones and Darling Spies: Seven Years of Vietnam War Reporting

By Beverly Deepe Keever  
University of Nebraska Press  
337 pages. Paperback \$26.95

IN APRIL 1961, BEVERLY Deepe, four years out of Nebraska and three

years out of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, set off for a trip around the world. Reaching Hong Kong, she was told by the Associated Press bureau chief, "Things are really heating up in Vietnam." She went there and stayed for seven years, freelancing and working for *Newsweek*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *New York Herald Tribune*. This memoir, written more than 40 years later but crisp and well-documented, recounts without self-pity or self-aggrandizement the catastrophes of a terrible war that she covered on the ground—among them the Tet offensive of 1968, the siege of Khe Sanh, and the battle of Hue. She saves for last the revelation that Pham Xuan An, who had worked with her (and other Americans) as a kind of assistant reporter for years, was not only a hard-working journalist but a Communist spy—as she found out in 1990. Yet, she believes, An never undermined her reporting and did his share of the work. The several books on Vietnam correspondents tend not to include Beverly Deepe among the journalistic bigfoots of the war, but this book is evidence that she understood what she saw and reported it honestly. **CJR**

JAMES BOYLAN is the founding editor of the Columbia Journalism Review and professor emeritus of journalism and history at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst.



## EXIT INTERVIEW

# New graf

**NICHOLAS LEMANN**, DEAN OF THE COLUMBIA JOURNALISM SCHOOL, HAS DECIDED to head back to the classroom after 10 years in the corner office overlooking College Walk. Before bringing the J-School into the 21st century, Lemann forged a career at smart, influential magazines (The Washington Monthly, Texas Monthly, The Atlantic, and, yes, The New Yorker, where he remains a staff writer); he also wrote several books. **Cyndi Stivers** emailed Lemann questions shortly after he presided over his final commencement in May. "One of the great pleasures of being at the Journalism School for a while," he said, is that "almost daily, you come upon the work of one of your former students in the course of doing your ordinary journalistic reading."

**Ten years is a nice round number, but why did you decide now not to re-up?** The obvious answer is that we're just completing our fundraising campaign. That's a good stopping point, and I don't think it's fair to my successor to plan the next campaign's themes and leave it to him to execute—it should be completely his show. More broadly, I think it's better for an institution of the size of the Journalism School to have a smooth leadership transition every ten years or so than to have one person stay as dean for a very long time. Also, I'd like to return to writing books.

**The journalism business certainly looks different than it did when you began as dean. How has the job/the school/the student body changed over the past decade?** The main changes in the student body are that it has become more international, and that interest in digital journalism has increased. The main change in the school is that it has grown significantly by most measures—budget, student body, range of programs. The main change in journalism has been the influence of the Internet, which has been great in every way except as regards the economics of mainstream news organizations.

**What is your own daily media menu, and how has it evolved during this period?** I

**'Always make it look like you're having fun, even if you're not.'**

am online ingesting media all day long. Little of my menu would surprise you, and giving the whole thing would be boring, so I'd like to highlight especially aggregation sites that survey and curate a wide range of material for you (my favorites are RealClearPolitics and Arts & Letters Daily), and expert blogs like The Monkey Cage, Balkinization, scotusblog, and OnEarth.

**How (and for what) do you hope your tenure will be remembered?** For bringing the Journalism School more into the orbit of the wider university, especially by dialing up the intellectual content of the curriculum, and for finding what I hope is the right way to position ourselves in the digital revolution.

**What do you regret not getting to do, or to finish?** *Je ne regrette rien.*

**What are your plans for the summer, and when you return to the classroom (which is when?), what will you be teaching?** Over the summer, I'll be mainly at our house in the Catskills. I am working on a New Yorker assignment, the 2014 Tanner Lectures at Stanford, and, with two former-dean colleagues, a Carnegie Corporation-funded report on the future of journalism education. When I return to teaching in 2014–15, I'll teach whatever the dean wants me to teach, but I'd like to return to my Evidence and Inference course and Art and Science of the Interview, if possible.

**What's your advice for Steve Coll—besides maintaining enough distance from CJR's editorial planning to ensure plausible deniability?** When I came to Columbia, the then-dean of Columbia Law School, David Leebron, who's now president of Rice University in Houston, took me to lunch, and I asked him this question. He said, "Always make it look like you're having fun, even if you're not." That's pretty hard to beat. **CJR**

# WINNERS



Established in 1863

**CALIFORNIA TEACHERS ASSOCIATION**

CTA is proud to honor the winners of the 2012 John Swett Awards for Media Excellence. These awards recognize individual journalists, publications, websites and stations for their dedication to excellence in covering California public education.

**Nanette Asimov**, *San Francisco Chronicle*  
Series on a Single Subject / Theme: "Accreditation crisis at SF City College"

**Claudia Meléndez Salinas**, *Monterey County Herald*  
Continuous Coverage: Education Issues

**Katy Murphy**, *Oakland Tribune*  
News Story: "Noticeable decline in school-age children in West Oakland"

**Richard Bammer**, *The Reporter*  
Column or Blog

**Heather Murtagh**, *San Mateo Daily Journal*  
Single Subject/Theme: "Stress of Success: Ready-made families"

**Shannon Barry**, *Milpitas Post*  
Continuous Coverage: Education Issues

**Cosmo Garvin**, *Sacramento News & Review*  
News Story: "Homework improvement"

**Dick Sparrer**, *Los Gatos Weekly-Times*  
Column or Blog: "Recalling another election – when a 10-year-old ran for president"

**Los Gatos Weekly-Times**  
Publication: Continuous Coverage Educational News

**Anthony Cody**, *Education Week*  
Continuous Coverage: Education Issues

**Trey Bundy**, *Bay Citizen*  
Feature Story: "Suspensions skyrocket at SF school struggling with violence"

**Chelsi Moy**, *Mission Local*  
News Story: "Mission schools paint bleak funding picture without Prop. 30"

**Lisa Schiff**, *Beyond Chron*  
Column or Blog: "School Beat"

**Lisette Mejia**, *Mission Local*  
Series on a Single Subject/Theme: "SFUSD school improvement grants"

**Rose Aguilar**, *KALW 91.7 FM*  
Talk Show/News Program: "Your Call"

**Ana Tintocalis**, *KQED Radio*  
Locally Produced Program: "Transitional kindergarten series"

**Lyanne Melendez**, *KGO-TV*  
Feature Story: "Fremont kids help raise money for Make-A-Wish"

**Len Ramirez**, *KPIX-TV*  
News Story: "East Palo Alto students attend Facebook Academy"

**KXTV-TV Channel 10**  
Locally Produced Program: "Teacher of the month series"

## CONGRATULATIONS FROM CTA!

# 54<sup>TH</sup>

## ANNUAL

# John Swett Awards for Media Excellence

**Dean E. Vogel**, *President*  
**Eric C. Heins**, *Vice President*  
**Mikki Cichocki**, *Secretary-Treasurer*  
**Carolyn Doggett**, *Executive Director*  
**Becky Zogelman**, *Associate Executive Director*  
**Jonathan Goldman**, *Manager*  
**Mike Myslinski**, *Media Specialist*

The California Teachers Association is an affiliate of the National Education Association. **nea**



do not erase

You may not realize it, but by using the name **Kleenex®** as a generic term for tissue, you risk erasing our coveted brand name that we've worked so hard for all these years. **Kleenex®** is a registered trademark and should *always* be followed by a ® and the words 'Brand Tissue'. Just pretend it's in permanent marker.

**Kleenex®**  
BRAND  
TISSUE

